'An emotional tour de force!
Your book inspired me, moved me to tears, but most of all made me proud …'

EXIT WOUNDS

One Australian's War On Terror

MAJOR GENERAL JOHN CANTWELL
With GREG BEARUP

WHAT READERS OF EXIT WOUNDS ARE SAYING

‘Boss, just finished your book. Me and bunch of guys here reckon it’s bloody good!’ P, SERVING SAS SOLDIER

‘From its *Mad Max* opening to its tranquil ending, this is a groundbreaking book. Your bravery in baring the dark pools of your soul and sharing your experiences of war is extraordinary.’ TRISH, NSW

‘Outstanding! Full of stunning, heart-stopping and mind-jarring detail that gives a glimpse into the realities of war.’ RON, VIETNAM VETERAN, QUEENSLAND

‘One of the most powerful non-fiction pieces I’ve read for a long time.’ ANDREW RULE, ASSOCIATE EDITOR, *HERALD SUN*

‘My deepest thanks for your brilliant book. It has gone a long way to help me understand and begin to overcome my own demons from military operations.’ DON, EX-SOLDIER, VICTORIA

‘I have just finished reading *Exit Wounds* and when I say it is one of the most powerful books I have ever read, I mean that most sincerely.’ BOB, FORMER US MARINE CORPS, THREE TOURS OF VIETNAM

‘An emotional tour de force! Your book inspired me, moved me to tears, but most of all made me proud that our defence force has people within it of such remarkable calibre.’ BEVERLEY, PSYCHIATRIC NURSE, VICTORIA

‘I cannot remember a time when I was more inspired to pursue my career in the Australian Defence Force than after reading your incredible story. Thank you, sir.’ CORRINNE, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY

‘A truly remarkable story of courage, compassion and sheer “goodness”. The last word may seem odd but I can’t think of any other way of highlighting this man’s enormous respect for the soldiers under his command.’ ROSS, VIA FACEBOOK

‘Your book made me so proud it was you who commanded our servicemen and women in Afghanistan during such deadly days.’ MARY, JOURNALIST, TASMANIA

‘Gripping, even scary. It moved me to tears many times.’ ANDREW, NSW

‘Your story is incredible, the writing is beautiful and your honesty, openness, candour and courage in sharing is inspiring.’ AMY, VIA FACEBOOK

‘Having served with you in Baghdad, I want you to know how much I enjoyed your inspiring book and how proud I am to have known you.’ JEREMY, SERVING SOLDIER

‘*Exit Wounds* is magnificent; an honest and direct appraisal of the human experience of war.’ BRYAN, FORMER BRITISH ROYAL MARINE COMMANDO

‘I haven’t read a book in years and usually avoid war books, but within three or four pages of your book I had to dry my eyes.’

NIGEL, MEDIC, VETERAN OF SIERRA LEONE, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

‘I read your book in one sitting, some chapters twice. It is passionate, focused and real. I also suffered PTSD because of my service, and your book has helped me immeasurably.’ TIM, FORMER ARMY OFFICER

‘Your book is illuminating, challenging and extremely moving. It is such an insight into the reality of war for those of us who will never experience it. It should be compulsory reading for all of those of us who participate in decisions to send people away to fight on our behalf.’ SENATOR PENNY WRIGHT, VIA EMAIL

‘Brilliant book, boss. I’ll never forget your outstanding leadership and the fact you always put the needs of your subordinates first. You’re still doing so, through your book *Exit Wounds*.’ D, SERVING SAS OFFICER

‘I am a Gulf War veteran. It is because of men like you that more of us came home than not. Thank you for your extraordinary book.’ K, EX-US ARMY

‘I was inspired, educated and moved by your book *Exit Wounds*. Your overwhelming sense of responsibility for the men and women you led shines through so strongly.’ JOHN SCHUMANN, SINGER, SONGWRITER, VETERANS ADVOCATE

‘I found myself reduced to tears by sections of your amazing book. I quite literally could not put it down.’ ANDRE, VICTORIA

‘*Exit Wounds* is remarkably honest, penetrating and convincing. The prose is brilliant in its simplicity and authenticity. The narrative is an unselfish gift to all those who experience the invisible wounds of war.’ DR JOHN A. PARRISH, CENTER FOR INTEGRATION OF MEDICINE AND INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY, BOSTON

‘This is a great narrative achievement, gripping and moving, almost overwhelming. Over and over again I was pulled up by the swift changes of tone and mood, horror tempered by steely wit and deeds of spontaneous kindness.’ JOHN, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY, VIA EMAIL

‘Anyone who has ever cried up Australia’s involvement in non-existential wars needs to read this, and weep for the damage done. The cold and sometimes casual calculus of “Australian interests” will be measured differently hereafter, in the hot and brutal light of this searing memoir.’
GERALDINE BROOKS

‘This is a rare book: an absolutely compelling story of war told from the top. Cantwell spares nothing of himself in this riveting account of the horrors, the triumphs, the pain and the damage of war in the 21st century.’
DAVID MARR

‘Generals are not supposed to do books like this. John Cantwell’s memoir is utterly compelling in its candour and humility. He cuts through the political spin and the flag-waving to portray Australians at war in Iraq and Afghanistan with unique insight and a special compassion. His account of the death of young men, and the pain and loneliness of high command, is breathtaking. This book, beautifully written, will stand in the front rank of Australian military history.
MIKE CARLTON

‘John Cantwell has always led from the front. In bravely detailing his struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, John is helping to break down any remaining stigma associated with the disorder. The positive impact John’s personal story will have on those in the military dealing with similar experiences cannot be overstated, not to mention the contribution it makes to community understanding.’

AIR CHIEF MARSHAL ANGUS HOUSTON AC, AFC (RET’D)

‘In Afghanistan I witnessed the extraordinary qualities of John Cantwell the military leader—but there was so much more to tell. This book is a powerful story about the impact of war on one man. But it also says much about commitment, courage and sacrifice of those who serve our country in war.’

SENATOR JOHN FAULKNER, MINISTER FOR DEFENCE 2009–10

‘Cantwell’s tribute to the men and women he commanded is to lay himself bare. His enemy is no longer on the battlefield, but in the dark labyrinth of the soldier’s haunting memories. The general’s honest and humble account of the price exacted by the torment of war will give solace to those who suffer their own “exit wounds” in silence.’

JANA WENDT

Major General John Cantwell AO DSC joined the Australian Army as a private soldier in 1974 and rose to general-officer rank. He was a tank officer and commanded at every level. His senior management appointments included that of Deputy Chief of the Army. In 2009 he led the initial national efforts to recover from the deadly Victorian Black Saturday fires. He served in three distinct wars: combat duty in Operation Desert Storm in 1991; in Iraq in 2006; and as the commander of all Australian forces in Afghanistan and the wider Middle East area of operations in 2010. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his leadership in action in Afghanistan, has been made a Member of the Order of Australia and an Officer of the Order of Australia, and received the United States Legion of Merit, along with

other commendations. He retired from the Australian Army in early 2012 after a career spanning 38 years.

Greg Bearup has been a feature writer at the *Good Weekend* for the past ten years and has twice been awarded a Walkley Award for his writing. Prior to this he worked for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In 2004–05 he lived in Pakistan and filed for various newspapers including the *Guardian*. During that time he also worked for the UN organising elections. He spent time in Syria, where he helped Iraqi refugees vote, and was then based for six months in Bamyan in the remote mountains of central Afghanistan working on the parliamentary elections. In 2009 he published *Adventures in Caravanastan* about a trip around Australia in a caravan with his partner and their baby. Reviewer Bruce Elder described it as ‘a subtle and ambiguous love letter to Australia in all its glory, craziness and diversity’.

EXIT WOUNDS

ONE AUSTRALIAN'S WAR ON TERROR

MAJOR GENERAL
JOHN CANTWELL
WITH GREG BEARUP

MELBOURNE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

This book is dedicated to my wife Jane,
who has been an unfailing source of support and love
through many dark days

I also dedicate this book to the memory of the extraordinary soldiers who lost their lives while under my command in Afghanistan in 2010, and whose courageous families continue to mourn:

Sapper Jacob Moerland, 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment,
killed in action on 7 June 2010

Sapper Darren Smith, 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment,
killed in action on 7 June 2010

Private Timothy Aplin, 2nd Commando Regiment,
killed in action on 21 June 2010

Private Scott Palmer, 2nd Commando Regiment,
killed in action on 21 June 2010

Private Benjamin Chuck, 2nd Commando Regiment,
killed in action on 21 June 2010

Private Nathan Bewes, 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment,
killed in action on 9 July 2010

Trooper Jason Brown, Special Air Service Regiment,
killed in action on 13 August 2010

Private Tomas Dale, 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment,
killed in action on 20 August 2010

Private Grant Kirby, 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment,
killed in action on 20 August 2010

Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, 6th Battalion,
The Royal Australian Regiment,

killed in action on 24 August 2010

Lest we forget

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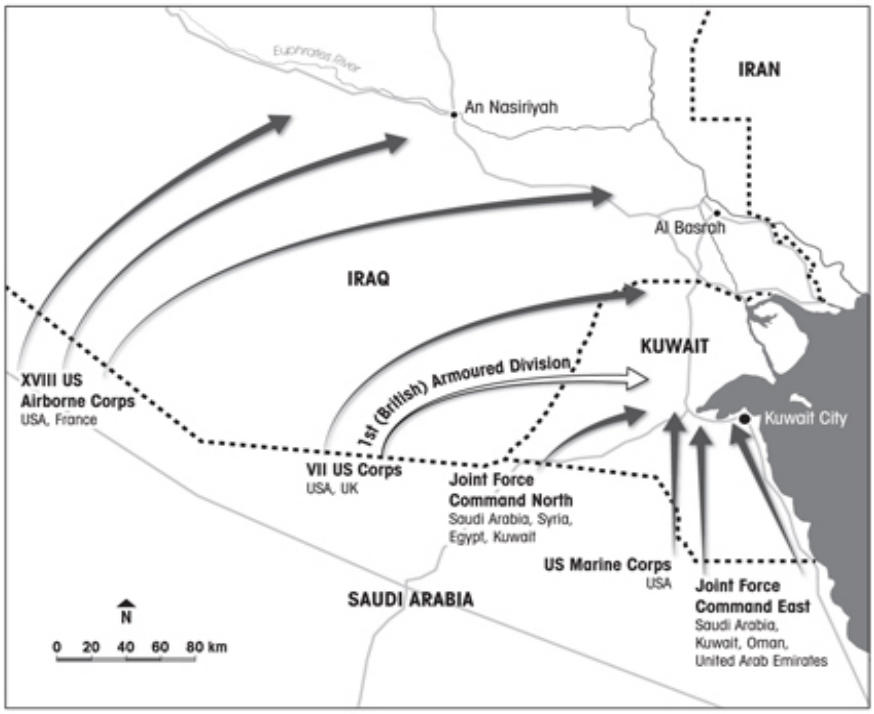
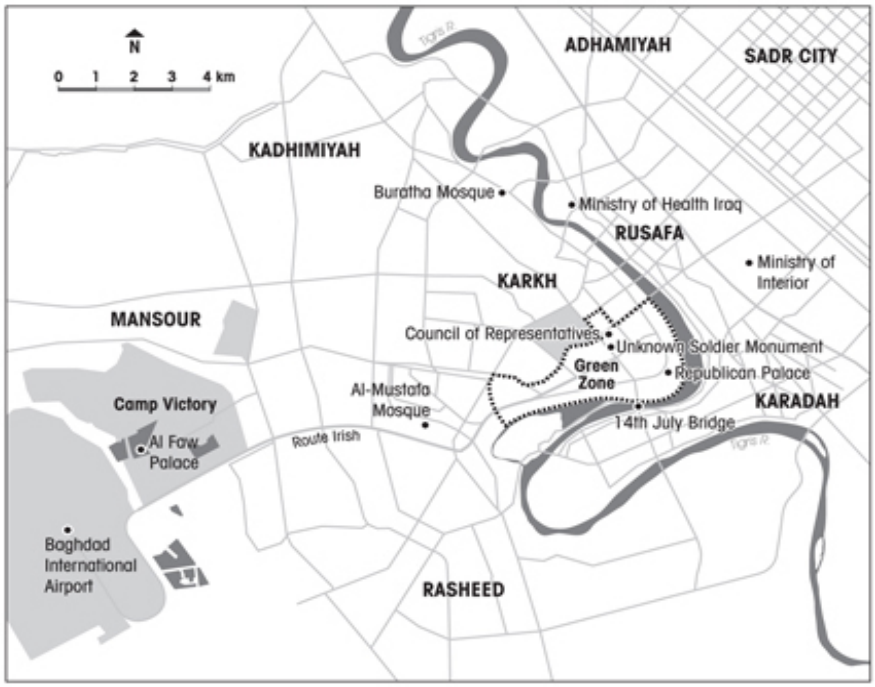
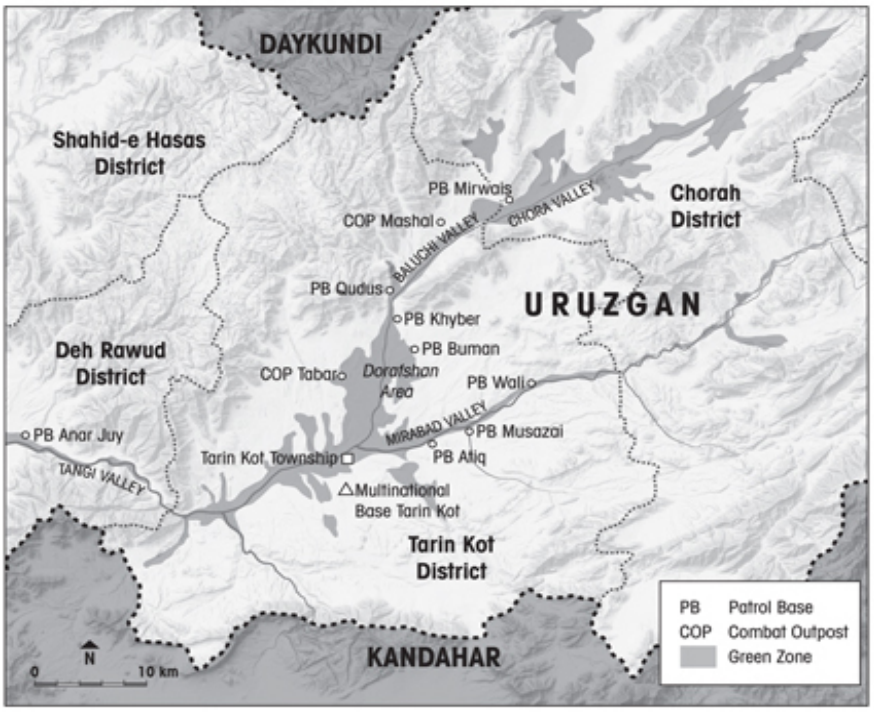


The overall scheme of manoeuvre for Operation Desert Storm, First Gulf War, 1991



Baghdad, showing key landmarks during my time in the Second Gulf War, 2006



Uruzgan Province, showing patrol bases and combat outposts, 2010–11

PROLOGUE

July 2011

I am sitting in a small room in a special wing of a private hospital in Melbourne. It's a psychiatric ward. The nurses tell me when to shower and when to eat and they watch as I take my medication. In the corridor a bedraggled woman, a fellow patient, tells me casually that she likes to cut herself—I've no idea how to respond. I'm told I'll be here for a week, locked in.

My overwhelming thoughts are that I shouldn't be here—I am a serving major general in the Australian Army. Generals are meant to be strong, to lead by example—they aren't paid to sit around in psychiatric wards. Not so long ago I was in charge of 1,500 Australian troops in Afghanistan and a thousand more in the wider region. Now, the only thing I'm able to manage on my own is a trip to the bathroom.

At least I know why I am in hospital. Yesterday I had a complete emotional meltdown in the consulting room of the psychiatrist who is attempting to help me deal with the problems arising from my combat tours. My wife, Jane, had accompanied me and I was ashamed that I couldn't live up to her gentle encouragement to 'Be strong.' Instead, I was reduced to sobbing tears and incoherent expressions of despair. A small part of me watched all this, bemused. I heard myself saying, Get a grip! Stop blubbering! I couldn't. I was overwhelmed with emotions, plagued by brutal memories, tormented by guilt, worn down by physical pain and weakened by days of sleeplessness.

The psychiatrist advised a spell in hospital. He was aware of my rank and reluctant to admit me to the ward of the local veterans' hospital with other serving and former military personnel. He suggested the private hospital. I was reluctant but knew I needed help.

At the heart of my distress is a chronic case of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, a debilitating condition that follows an event where a person witnesses injury or death, is threatened with injury or death, or inflicts it. Often, people with PTSD have persistent, frightening thoughts and memories. Nightmares and flashbacks are common. Sufferers often feel emotionally numb, especially towards people to whom they were once close. PTSD supplants all normal emotions, creating a state of anxiety and heightened awareness.

I have managed my PTSD, to a greater or lesser extent, for the last twenty of my thirty-eight years in the army. It has been a constant companion. There are times when I am able to manage the nightmares and bury the memories deep enough that I can almost forget I have it. These are the good days.

But the demons always come back to haunt me. My waking hours are punctuated by flashbacks. I flinch violently at unexpected noises and endure a persistent sense of ill-defined dread. At different times I become irritable, anxious, angry, tearful, morose and confused. These are the bad days.

For two decades I hid my problems because I felt they were a sign of weakness. I was afraid to tell anyone, other than my wife, in case I looked foolish or soft. I was also afraid it would damage my chances of promotion in a job I loved. I suffered in private.

This whole saga began soon after I returned from fighting in the First Gulf War in 1990–91. I was a major on a two-year exchange with the British Army and, during the war, I was assigned an eyes-and-ears role reporting to my generals from the front line.

I was there when US artillery and aircraft bombed the Iraqis with firepower greater than anything seen in either world war. I was there when we attacked across the minefields and tank ditches. I was there when US forces used bulldozer blades mounted on tanks to bury alive Iraqi soldiers in their trenches. There were numerous times I thought I'd be killed. I walked through minefields terrified I'd lose my legs. I witnessed scores of Iraqi dead. I collected body parts. I saw destruction on a massive scale.

I added another layer of painful memories during a year-long deployment to Baghdad in 2006 as a brigadier in charge of strategic planning for the Coalition. It was a bad year to be in Iraq. I had asked, pleaded, for the job, but in the dreadful summer of that year I witnessed mass killings, car bombs, rocket attacks and the breakdown of law and order.

The death rate quadrupled from previous years, and thousands of Iraqi civilians and scores of Coalition troops were killed every month. I travelled around Baghdad and throughout the country, dodging car bombs, roadside booby traps and small-arms fire. I saw the aftermath of a car packed with explosives being detonated in a market full of women and children. I made life-and-death decisions.

Then, in January 2010 I was deployed as the commander of the Australian forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan, this time as a major general. It was the best job and the worst job I'd ever had. It was the pinnacle of my career, commanding Australian troops in combat. I was responsible for thousands of personnel from all three services. I deeply respected the airmen and admired the sailors under my command, and spent as much time as I could with them. I wanted to share the risks the Diggers in Afghanistan took every day. Whenever I could, I joined patrols 'outside the wire', walking the same dusty tracks and fields as the ordinary soldiers. I did everything in my power to keep them alive. I failed. In that year I lost

ten soldiers under my command, killed in action. I personally identified the remains of each of them, before sending them home to their families. More than sixty of my soldiers were wounded, some horribly.

As I paid a final salute at the foot of yet another flag-draped coffin loaded into the belly of an aircraft bound for Australia, I found myself questioning if the pain and suffering of our soldiers and their families were worth it. I wondered if the deaths of any of those fallen soldiers made any difference. I recoiled from such thoughts, which seemed disrespectful, almost treasonous. I had to answer in the affirmative, or risk exposing all my endeavours as fraudulent. I *had* to believe it was worth it. But the question continues to prick at my mind. I don't have an answer. Perhaps I will reach a conclusion in the writing of this story.

While I was in command I crushed my own feelings so I could focus on the mission. There were many sailors, soldiers and airmen to lead and keep alive. There were complex political and management problems to be solved. There was a war to be fought. As I had always done, I refused to let the PTSD interfere with my work. I would grieve later.

When I returned to Australia, it was in the knowledge that I was being considered for the job of Chief of the Army. But once home, with the sudden release of responsibility, the PTSD that I'd held at bay for so long began to consume me. I didn't really think I'd be chosen for the job but I was worried that, against the odds, I might actually get it. I knew I wasn't up to the task. I was not in a fit state to lead and command myself, let alone the Australian Army. Our soldiers deserved better. I contacted the then Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and said I was not well. He was kind, insightful and decisive. He expressed his concern, offered encouragement and told me I was out of the running. It was the right decision.

My descent towards collapse in the psychiatrist's office gathered pace.

The nightmares came nightly. Flashbacks leapt before my eyes; fear and anxiety crowded my mind. I found it hard to be in crowds. I stopped driving when one day a vehicle came towards us and I let go of the wheel to shield myself from an imaginary bomb blast. I found I had no patience for the concerns of ordinary life. The excitement about who would win *MasterChef* was difficult to fathom when my soldiers lay torn and disfigured in a hospital. The sadness of it all wore away my spirit.

Jane had to deal with the brunt of my unhappiness and I tested her calm and sympathetic nature. She was my rock when the storms of emotion broke around me. She held me when the tears wouldn't stop. But I knew I was in trouble. I swallowed my pride and walked into a military psychologist's office to ask for help.

And so here I am, in a psychiatric ward.

I think of my mental scars in the same way I think of the entry and exit wounds I saw in the bodies of some of my soldiers. The entry wound is often very small; sometimes it goes unnoticed. But the projectile does its work inside the body, tearing and destroying. The insurgents' weapon of choice in Afghanistan, the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifle, is designed so the bullet flies true through the air but becomes unstable and tumbles once it hits a human body. Often, the deformed and somersaulting bullet or piece of shrapnel will exit the body with great force, tearing a large exit wound in the back of the victim's body.

I believe the same process applies to the mind: a traumatic memory pierces the consciousness and then tumbles through, causing an ugly, gaping wound. It's sometimes hard to determine why certain experiences breach the mind's natural defences, but their destructive wake is obvious.

That's what I have. Exit wounds in my mind. This is the story of how I received them, and the consequences.

This is my story, but it is also the story of thousands of Australian veterans—from Iraq, East Timor, Afghanistan and other conflicts—who carry similar emotional scars. Men and women whom we send off to war, largely ignore while they are there and who are too easily forgotten once they are home.

FIRST GULF WAR, 1990–91

1

THE DAWN BEFORE

4 a.m., 24 February 1991

I am crouched in the darkness beside my armoured vehicle, a modified personnel carrier, in a nameless patch of the Saudi Arabian desert near Iraq. I have been in this desert for two months and the searing summer has become a bitter winter. The border is only a few kilometres away and just north of that is an infantry division of the Iraqi Army we intend to destroy. The division is thought to number 6,000 men with tanks and artillery. In an hour and a half the American force to which I have been attached will surge forward to attack the Iraqis in the opening blow of the ground offensive of the 1991 Gulf War—Saddam's Mother of All Battles. I am thirty-five years old and have been a soldier half my life. This is my first war.

Around me, hundreds of armoured vehicles and their crews are constantly strobe-lit by the flashes of massive explosions to our front, a bizarre disco of men and machinery. One moment the hulking shapes are barely visible in the murk, the next they are etched into my vision by the flashes of detonation after detonation. During a lull in the artillery barrages, B-52s lay a carpet of bombs onto the Iraqis. In comparison to the artillery salvos, the aerial bombardment is god-like and merciless, falling thousands of feet from places unheard and unseen. To my left, about 20 metres away, is the prominent humpbacked command and control vehicle from which the US colonel commanding this part of the war will run the battle. With each

flash there's a silhouette of the vehicle's bristling antennas, boxes of rations stacked on its roof, a rolled camouflage net bulging where it has been lashed down. In the intervening darkness, dull red light from its open rear door spills onto the sand behind. But this and all other colour is stripped away with each flare of light, leaving a hard-edged black-and-white image in my eyes. In this monochrome scene, other men have gathered, like us, to watch the show from behind their armoured personnel carriers. There is an occasional yell and I see a raised fist applauding the deadly work. The excitement is infectious.

Accompanying the light show, violent shock waves are transmitted through the wet desert sand and up through my heavy boots. Even the armoured vehicle at my side rattles and rocks on its suspension with each tremor. But it is the noise—brutal, incessant and inhuman—that is overwhelming. It is the most physical sound I have ever heard. The thuds slam into me; the horizon ripples and convulses with explosions, and I find myself whooping along with my two fellow crewmen. 'Will you look at that!' I yell at them, but my voice is drowned by the crash of the bombs. In the flashes of light I can see my radio operator, Steve, yelling something back at me but I have no idea what he's saying. We grin at each other and I punch his shoulder. Beyond him I see my driver, Pete, propped on one knee. He is staring ahead, mesmerised. They are good men, a couple of English lads just a few years out of school. Pete is chirpy and boyish and eager to please while Steve, a tad older, is a little more reserved and thoughtful. Both are keen, when given the chance, to take the piss out of me for being an Aussie convict and like to dredge up old and rare English cricket victories. We've become close, cocooned in our little wagon in preparation for this moment.

I look to the conflagration ahead and feel the prickle of fear return, dampening the euphoria of the cheering. Soon I will face combat for the

first time. The questions every soldier asks himself before his first battle nag at my consciousness: What will it really be like? Will I freeze with fear? Will I let my team down? I've trained for this moment since I was seventeen, and I'm confident I know what to do. Soldiers don't ask, Will I die? Death, we figure, is always for others.

The aerial bombardment suddenly stops with a final rending ripple of blasts and the darkness envelops us again. For a time there is silence before I speak. 'Can you imagine what it must have been like to be under that?'

Pete, his eyes wide and his voice almost reverent, responds: 'Who could live through something like that?' No-one answers. The truth is I am not really thinking about the people beneath all this. In a few hours I may have to kill Iraqis but I feel no hatred towards them. I despise Saddam Hussein, but for his soldiers there is simply no emotion. They are an obstacle to be neutralised by capture or death.

I am an Australian Army officer serving with the British, having been seconded to a British tank regiment a couple of years ago. My job is liaison officer; I am accompanying the American advance to report back to my own commander and to help coordinate the movement of the British troops and tanks that will follow. I stand next to my armoured vehicle, resting a hand on its steel shell. Its cold metal plate is reassuring yet relatively thin compared to the thick armour of a heavy combat tank, my normal mode of transport.

After days of constant activity with only a few hours' sleep, I am overtaken by a sudden wave of tiredness and I yawn into the night before shrugging my shoulders to cast off the weariness. I need to be more alert. I take a few deep breaths of the cold, moist air but I still feel weary and my head aches.

Then the artillery resumes—not since the great battles of World War II has such fury been unleashed. Throughout the night an extraordinary

concentration of artillery and rockets pound the Iraqi defences ahead—50,000 rounds in the final two hours, each capable of destroying a block of flats. If this attack were to be unleashed on the centre of any city in Australia, barely a building would be left standing. Our formation, the 1st Brigade of the US 1st Infantry Division, is just one of many combat units now preparing to attack. We have been allocated thirteen artillery battalions and more if needed. Thirteen artillery battalions with eighteen guns each! In my entire career I've only ever witnessed the firepower of one battalion, and then it was spread over multiple targets. During my years of training I had marvelled at old black-and-white film of massed British guns firing during the desert battles of North Africa in World War II, but that was nothing compared to this.

Now the guns are joined by a new instrument of destruction as boxy rocket launchers point to the horizon; there is a whooshing roar as one by one the rockets leap from the tubes, the howl of their departure continuing for several seconds as each arcs upwards propelling the warhead towards its target, carving golden trails through the darkness. Each rocket launcher is capable of blanketing an entire square kilometre with high explosive bomblets and I can see a dozen or more clustered to our rear. The firings shroud the launch sites in clouds of glowing white smoke that drift across the desert as an acrid fog. We'll soon assault the Iraqi defences where these missiles are aimed and I can't help but murmur encouragement to the gunners.

During another break in the firing, Coalition Apache attack helicopters sweep overhead in the darkness. Unlit, they remain invisible until they begin launching their Hellfire missiles in coordinated volleys. I can see the yellow flare of the missiles leaving the rails, and hear the thump of explosions as they hit their targets. As they break off their attack and clatter

away to the south, the deep thud of artillery resumes with a beat that hits with a slap on the chest.

‹ ›

Standing beside my vehicle with Steve and Pete, I mentally review the assault plan. At around 0530 hours this force, along with another equally powerful brigade on our right flank, will advance to attack the Iraqi defensive line. In the lead will be Abrams tanks and Bradley armoured infantry fighting vehicles, accompanied by combat engineer vehicles fitted with bulldozer blades and other grappling devices. Under the cover of a last barrage of artillery fire, combat engineers will bulldoze holes through the border berm—a snaking, earthern defensive barrier a couple of metres high and many kilometres long. The assaulting troops will close up on the enemy positions, firing at their targets as they advance. The combat engineer vehicles will begin clearing paths through the Iraqi traps and obstacles: yawning ditches, serried ranks of barbed wire and deep, layered minefields containing both anti-personnel and anti-tank mines by the tens of thousands.

With the lanes cleared of mines, more tanks and fighting vehicles will pour through, seizing a large front, some 16 kilometres wide. When the American field commanders decide the breach area is ready, I will radio my headquarters, waiting behind, to begin a second wave of attack. On that signal the British 1st Armoured Division will lunge forward, passing through the breach in the Iraqi defences opened by the Americans.

That is the plan but there is much that could go wrong. It is possible the Iraqis will emerge from their underground bunkers and put up a real contest from their fighting trenches. Disciplined troops fighting from well-prepared defensive positions have an advantage over the assaulting force, which must pass through pre-planned killing zones. The artillery barrage now underway

is designed to reduce that advantage by neutralising the defenders. But it is likely our force will suffer casualties from mines, both to vehicles and the dismounted troops, so mine clearers will lead the way. A major threat is the Iraqi artillery. Coalition aircraft have pounded dozens of Iraqi artillery positions in the days leading up to the assault, but there is no guarantee all of the artillery and mortar emplacements have been destroyed. They could be deadly if used against us while we are crowded into the breach lanes.

The greatest fear is Iraq's chemical munitions—mustard gas and nerve agents—which are thought to be part of its defensive array. The Iraqis proved their willingness to use chemical weapons on many occasions during the prolonged Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s and even against their own citizens in the infamous gassing of Kurdish civilians in the town of Halabja in 1988, killing 5,000 people. As a precaution we are all wearing thick protective carbon-impregnated cloth chemical suits, along with rubber overboots. We carry our gasmasks and gloves in a bulky satchel on our hips.

Perhaps the most likely risk to an orderly assault is the 'friction' that accompanies all military operations: the accumulation of small setbacks, losses and plain mistakes that fray the best-laid military plans. Every sensible commander recognises that his plan will begin to unravel from the moment he launches his forces. In such a complex operation, in a congested and deadly area with thousands of vehicles moving through it, the likelihood of mistakes and mishaps is very high. The sheer difficulty of getting everything right is enormous despite multiple rehearsals. Everyone —especially the commanders—is tense as the assault draws near.

Waiting in the dark, still watching the fireworks along the Iraqi front, my mind is focused on the potential problems of the coming hours, but I am surprised by my relative calm. I am a little nervous but overall I feel a sense of anticipation. A professional soldier, I did everything in my power to

make sure I was selected to be here. My wife, Jane, to whom my thoughts dart at unexpected moments throughout the night, understood my desire, need even, to prove myself in war.

I decide to conduct a final meeting with the commander of the brigade, Colonel Lon ‘Bert’ Maggart, and with a gesture to my crew I step across the dark sand towards his vehicle. The ramp of the command vehicle is down and several men dressed in their chemical suits stand around it listening to the radio traffic. In the light from the vehicle’s interior, I spot the commander standing with his executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Dan Magee. Both men, but especially the colonel, have impressed me with their calm manner and competence.

‘Hi, sir,’ I say, identifying myself in the dark. ‘It’s Major John Cantwell. I wanted to check if there are any last-minute changes.’

‘Hey John,’ Colonel Maggart replies. ‘Nothing new to report. We’ll be doing it just like we practised.’ He sounds a little edgy.

‘Great, sir,’ I say. ‘The Brits will be moving into their positions about now. I’ve heard nothing that you need to worry about.’ Hundreds of British armoured and wheeled vehicles are massing in the darkness behind us in a vast holding area, waiting to stream north after the Americans attack.

The colonel nods but makes no comment. He’s anxious to get started, repeatedly folding his arms then placing them on his hips. In contrast, Dan Magee, standing at his boss’s side, is a picture of stillness.

Yesterday Lieutenant Colonel Magee and another officer briefed me on the plans for the assault. Among the many details, one element struck me. The plan is to overwhelm the Iraqi infantry in the trenches. It is simple but brutal—pairs of tanks equipped with bulldozer blades will plough down both sides of the enemy trenches, pushing masses of sand into the trenches while a Bradley fighting vehicle, following the tanks, fires between them at the Iraqis. The intent, cold and clear, is to bury them, alive or dead. When I

heard this I was startled, struggling with the morality of burying men alive. Magee sensed my unease and said: ‘A bullet or a bulldozer blade, it doesn’t matter. We’re saving American lives, and that’s all that *does* matter.’ Despite his ethical arithmetic, I was still uneasy. But there was nothing I could have done to change those plans and so I stayed mute—I was about to go into battle with these men and I didn’t want them to think of me as ‘that soft-cock Australian liaison officer’.

Now, waiting in the desert with less than an hour until the assault is triggered, I wish Colonel Maggart good luck and we shake hands. I had liked him on first meeting. I’d appreciated his cheerful nature and willingness to talk about what lay ahead. When I’d been talking with him yesterday a group of American soldiers had walked by, burdened with helmets, body armour and weapons. Colonel Maggart had called the company commander over to introduce me. The man was a huge Native American with a wonderful name: John Bushyhead, his surname a marker of his Cherokee heritage. When I asked how his men were feeling, Captain Bushyhead smiled. ‘They’re fine and ready to go, sir!’ he said, more for Colonel Maggart’s benefit than mine. I asked if there were any nerves about facing combat for the first time. ‘A few nerves, sir,’ said Bushyhead more sedately, ‘but I’ve got some great NCOs and they’ll look after the men.’

Colonel Maggart spoke quietly: ‘We’ll all be combat veterans soon, Captain.’ For a moment the three of us pondered this, then Maggart put out his hand to shake Bushyhead’s enormous paw. The captain replied with an equally level ‘Yessir’ then departed to follow his men. Part of me wished I was him, about to lead men in combat.

Afterwards, we walked back to my vehicle where I promised the colonel a meal prepared with British rations, a change from the weeks of the much-disdained Meals Ready to Eat, or MREs: plastic bags of pulpy pasta or stew. Unlike the US food, the British ration packs were made up of

canned meat and vegetables, much prized by Americans longing for something that at least looked a little like ‘joined-up food’. As Colonel Maggart and I arrived at the rear of our vehicle, Steve and Pete handed us plastic plates of steaming food through the open rear door, right on schedule.

While we ate, Maggart outlined what he needed from me as liaison officer. ‘Stay close, John,’ he said. ‘If things start to go wrong I’ll need to get hold of you in person right away. And once the Brits pass through the breach area, I need to know instantly if there are problems. I’ll be responsible for making the passage of lines go smoothly, but we’ll need to work together to iron out any screw-ups,’ he added, looking me in the eye.

‘That’s all the guidance I need, Colonel,’ I said. ‘I’ll keep my vehicle with your command group during the moves and dismount to get over to the command vehicle when we stop.’

‘Fine,’ he replied, ‘now let me say a proper howdy to your crew here.’ I introduced Steve and Pete, who were respectful but not overawed. A discussion of the quality of rations ensued, followed by some talk about the upcoming assault. Pete wanted to know if the colonel expected the Iraqis to fight hard, and his reply was that he hoped our firepower would ‘discourage’ them.

Then Colonel Maggart’s eye was drawn to the many photographs taped inside the vehicle. As well as the usual collection of busty girls torn from magazines, there were several photographs of a young, heavily pregnant woman. She was Steve’s wife, a young German woman whom he’d met and married while based in Germany. She was due in a month or so and Steve wrote constantly to her, often placing a dozen letters at a time into the mail bag. Colonel Maggart congratulated Steve on the impending birth of their first child, adding with genuine seriousness, ‘You better be extra careful

tomorrow and in the days afterwards, young man. We need to make sure you get home safely.'

Steve had replied with a quiet, 'Yes, sir,' all signs of the banter of minutes before gone as his eyes drifted to the photos of his wife.

Yesterday's conversation now seems a long way away. With the artillery bombardment reaching a crescendo, I tell my crewmen to mount up. Steve climbs in and closes the door at the rear of the vehicle while Pete and I walk to the side to climb up on top and lower ourselves into our two hatches. As a tank officer, I am used to being surrounded by 60 tonnes of armour and seeing a massive cannon protruding from my tank's turret. Here I just have a light machine gun mounted next to me. If it comes to shooting, I'll have to stand up and use this puny machine gun, fully exposed to whoever is shooting at us.

Reaching down, I pull up my helmet, which is fitted with headphones and a boom microphone, drawing it onto my head and settling it in place. The familiar smell of stale sweat from the well-used helmet lining drifts to my nostrils. I test the communications, confirm the boys can hear me, then poke my head out to look around.

Overhead, the rush of artillery shells continues. The light from the explosions reveals an array of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles poised for attack. The sheer scale of it is staggering. Hundreds of dark angular shapes squat on the desert floor. I look enviously at the menacing bulk of the M1 tanks. The Bradley fighting vehicles are box-shaped wedges with high turrets perched on top, some with infantrymen's packs strapped along the sides. Closer to me are the vehicles of Colonel Maggart's command element, older M113 armoured personnel carriers similar in shape to my own British-made vehicle. Of these, the two large command and control vehicles, motherships of a sort, are prominent. It is from these vehicles that Colonel Maggart's staff will help him run the coming battle, and that I must

gain the tactical data needed to keep my British headquarters informed of progress. There is a sense of building anticipation. I hear several nearby vehicles start their engines and I tell Pete to do likewise. Our vehicle has been reliable so far, but the constant power draw from our radios drains the batteries and it would be galling now to have to beg a jump-start. The diesel engine cranks briefly then bursts into life, throwing a plume of smoke from its exhaust into the air, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Steve has tuned in the radios and I hear various crackles through my headphones. There is nothing I need respond to. All the talking and planning are done.

I have my watch strapped outside the sleeve of my chemical suit so I can tell the time even when fully kitted, and I squint at it now: 0520—almost time.

Some artillery fire begins to shift to targets further to the north as H-Hour, the hour that the ground offensive is to begin, draws near. The remainder continues to cover the advance, now only minutes away. I feel the excitement growing inside me. I press the intercom switch. ‘Okay, guys,’ I say, trying to sound calm. ‘The artillery is starting to lift. We won’t move out until the colonel does, so we’ll sit tight here, but be ready. You okay back there, Steve?’

It must be frustrating for him, stuck in the back with no view outside. Usually a liaison officer like me would be in the back, monitoring the radios. But I am an armour officer, a proud one, fresh from commanding a squadron of fourteen tanks with the British Army based in Germany. I made it clear on the first day I joined the crew that I would be commanding the vehicle. Steve had shown some disappointment but we’d reached a compromise: when the situation allowed I would let him squeeze up into the commander’s hatch with me. Right now, though, I want everyone to

stay in their allotted place and Steve shows no sign of wanting it any other way. ‘I’m fine, boss,’ he says.

It is 0530. H-Hour.

Without any discernible signal, there is sudden movement to our front and flanks. Dawn is an hour away but there’s a hint of light in the sky. I can see M1 tanks, Bradleys and engineer vehicles rolling forward towards the Iraqi positions. I sense, rather than see, many more beyond them in the gloom. There is no headlong rush, more an irresistible surge, purposeful and deadly. Just look at *that*! I think. I’m in the middle of a mechanised brigade going into combat! Aloud, I tell Steve what’s happening. ‘They’re off, Steve. I can see the lead companies getting underway.’ No reply, but I know he’s listening intently.

I am ready. In my most recent letter to Jane, posted yesterday, I wrote that the strongest emotion I felt was release, from both uncertainty and waiting. ‘I still feel anxious about going into battle, not because I am worried about my own safety but because it will bring so many young deaths, on both sides …’ I signed off, ‘I love you, with all my heart, and for always. My love to you and to our boys David and Daniel, your loving husband and father, John.’ They’d been in my thoughts throughout the day, but at this moment my mind is clear. All fear and tiredness have vanished. Ahead, the last salvos of the artillery bombardment are gouging the Iraqi defences. Well ahead, I see the flash of a tank firing and feel relief that after the months of build-up we are finally moving. ‘The waiting is over, boys,’ I say across the intercom.

I am at war.

2

THE ROAD TO WAR

My presence here is part of a long tradition, dating back to before the Boer War. I am an Australian at war because Britain or the US has decided upon war—that and the madness of Saddam Hussein.

This conflict has its roots in the Iran–Iraq War, which began in September 1980 when Saddam unleashed a massive ground assault against Iran, fearful that the Iranian Revolution could spark an uprising of the majority Iraqi Shi'a against the Sunni ruling class. Saddam also had aspirations to be the leader of a Middle Eastern superpower and Iran was to be his first trophy.

It was a particularly ugly war. The Iraqis had the superior weaponry but Iran harnessed the religious fanaticism of the revolution. The conflict settled into a protracted, deadly stalemate of trench warfare not seen since the horrors in the mud of the Somme some sixty-four years before. The scale of slaughter was sickening. Wave after wave of soldiers would be launched across no-man's-land to be butchered by modern machine guns. It was death on an industrial scale. The use of mustard gas by the Iraqis added a further Great War grimness to the fighting. Iranian boys as young as ten, chanting in religious fervour, were martyred in their thousands as they were deployed in a simple but barbaric method of clearing landmines—they'd run in lines across the minefields, blowing themselves to bits, to clear the way for soldiers to follow.

Henry Kissinger, when asked what he thought of the war, coldly said: ‘It’s a pity they both can’t lose.’ Kissinger got his wish.

The conflict lasted eight years, ending in August 1988 when the United Nations was finally able to broker a ceasefire. By the time the Iranians had withdrawn to the original border, half a million soldiers and civilians were dead, and hundreds of thousands wounded. It had been total war, and while the Iranians had mercilessly taxed their impoverished people to pay for it, Saddam had gone on a credit spree. He’d borrowed tens of billions from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and, illicitly, from western nations including the United States. With the war over, the creditors wanted their money back. Saddam fumed.

On the other side of the world I was largely ignorant of these events that would come to define my life. I would catch a glimpse of the story on the news or in the papers and briefly imagine a bunch of Arabs fighting each other. I had no idea the Iranians were Persian—I’d never been overseas, not even to Bali. When the war began in 1980 I was a 24-year-old sergeant with the intelligence corps, based in Brisbane—among others tasks, as an interrogation specialist I harangued soldiers for a living to inoculate them against future capture by the enemy, whoever that was.

I came from a close-knit Catholic family, the eldest of eight kids. My parents were wonderful, hardworking people, devoted to our family. For a while they owned a peanut farm at Kingaroy in Queensland. Despite their efforts to make a go of it, the farm failed and we moved to Toowoomba when I was in my teens. I had to leave boarding school and attend the local Christian Brothers College.

The war in Vietnam had played out as background noise in my youth, like the cricket on the television in summer, and I suppose as a teenager I was influenced by it. I was in the army cadets at school and many of the soldiers who came to our camps were recently returned from Vietnam. We

looked upon them as gods. I ploughed through Commando comics, imagining myself as the valiant hero. I envisioned a soldier's life as noble, adventurous.

In February 1974, I joined the army as a private for six years. I was seventeen years old. School hadn't interested me—I was distracted and lazy—but in the army I had a purpose and I loved it. For the first time I experienced the joy of winning, and I loved that too. I came first in my recruit training course and was quickly promoted through the non-commissioned ranks to sergeant.

It was on one of my early postings, at Kapooka outside Wagga, that I met Jane, who was working as a corporal at the recruit training battalion. She was from Deniliquin, a country kid like me. Our relationship didn't immediately flourish—the first few work-related phone calls were combative and we disagreed about priorities. Things changed when I met her in person. We saw each other a few times in the staff boozer on the base and our love was sealed one night over our first and only game of darts when Jane missed the board and the dart landed in my foot. Who could resist? I soon realised that here was someone special. We were engaged a few months later and married within a year, in April 1977. It was the best decision of my life. Our first son, David, was born in October 1980.

Around this time, as the Iraqis were preparing to attack Iran, I made a decision that would lead me to the Middle East. I was becoming frustrated with my work. I loved army life but at the age of twenty-four I had already been a sergeant for three years and I felt there was more I could do to influence events. Jane and I talked it over. I applied for officer training and was accepted.

Jane took our baby and went to live with her mother while I went to the Officer Cadet School at Portsea, Victoria in 1981. Determined to vindicate Jane's confidence in me, I threw myself into training and a year later

graduated first in my class, which allowed me to pick which unit I would serve in. I made my decision one day when we were on a training exercise at Puckapunyal, Victoria. We were out in the bush, lumping around heavy packs in the heat and the dust, playing war games. In the scrub I could hear a deep rumble. Suddenly a Leopard tank burst into the open at a tremendous speed with a rooster tail of dust billowing out from behind it. It belted past us. The crew commander peered out the top wearing a black beret and headset and looking cool and in control. I was mesmerised by the sheer power of the machine and thought, Holy shit, I want a piece of that! I became a tank commander.

Our second son, Daniel, arrived in 1985. Life was good. A few years later I was offered the job of my dreams—seconded to the British Army commanding a tank squadron in West Germany, facing off against the Soviet forces across the border. After years of peace, this was what I yearned for, to go to a place where there was a real threat. Jane and I, along with the boys, left for Europe at the end of 1988, just after the peace deal had been signed between Iran and Iraq.

But that peace was short-lived. Saddam interpreted the debts he owed with typical arrogance: he took the view that Iraq alone had shouldered the bloody burden of resisting rising Shi’a power in the Gulf. He pressured his regional creditors to waive the debt. They refused. Saddam ramped up the rhetoric against Kuwait in particular, accusing it of overproducing oil and driving down prices at a time when Iraq desperately needed income. He also accused the Kuwaitis of stealing Iraqi oil by slant-drilling into the Rumaila oilfield in southern Iraq. Saddam coveted Kuwait’s oilfields, infrastructure and seaports on the Persian Gulf. He threatened to invade while the international community dithered.

On the stroke of midnight on 2 August 1990, his threat became reality. Four elite Republican Guard divisions comprising up to 100,000 troops

backed by hundreds of tanks seized Kuwait City from the north and west. Commandos in helicopter-borne and amphibious assaults spearheaded the invasion. The Kuwaiti defence force, despite the months of increasing tension, was caught ill prepared and was unable to mount meaningful resistance. The air force launched a few sorties but suffered heavy losses. The main thrust by Iraqi forces into Kuwait City culminated with an attack on the royal residence of the Emir of Kuwait. The Emir's youngest brother was killed but most of the royal family and the country's ruling class fled to Saudi Arabia.

After two days of disorganised resistance by the Kuwaitis, it was all over—Saddam Hussein rejoiced and appointed one of his cousins governor of the new Iraqi province of Kuwait. The invasion was a flagrant breach of the United Nations Charter. Both Iraq and Kuwait were UN members and such naked aggression between member states was unprecedented.

Following the invasion the international reaction was as swift as it was late. The United Nations Security Council passed UN Resolution 660 condemning the invasion and demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi troops. This was followed in rapid succession by a resolution on 6 August which placed economic sanctions on Iraq, and a brace of further resolutions that variously disallowed arms sales and funding transfers to Iraq, decried the illegal annexation of Kuwait, demanded the unimpeded departure of nationals from third countries from within Iraq and Kuwait, and authorised a naval blockade to enforce economic sanctions against Iraq.

The fear was that the Iraqis would press on to seize the vast oilfields of Saudi Arabia. The US immediately deployed small ground units, backed by two aircraft carriers, followed by a massive build-up of combat forces. George H. W. Bush denounced the attack as 'a naked act of aggression' and justified the US military build-up in Saudi Arabia, named Operation Desert

Shield, by stating that ‘The sovereign independence of Saudi Arabia is of vital interest to the United States.’ The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, branded the invasion as ‘absolutely unacceptable’, backing her words with an initial deployment of an armoured brigade of several thousand soldiers and combat aircraft. This force would grow to become the second largest in the Coalition. Australia’s Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, decided it was in ‘our national interest’ too, and committed three navy ships and, later, small groups of specialists, all without consulting Cabinet. The invasion sparked a sense of crisis, demanding action. Critically, several Arab nations also joined Egypt and Syria in contributing 55,000 combat troops. By late 1990, the coalition confronting Saddam had grown to thirty-four nations. Half a million troops faced an Iraqi army of equal size. The war, when it came, promised to be the largest confrontation since World War II.

Saddam issued a string of proposals to stall an attack, but no-one believed him and the extraordinary flow of men and machinery into Saudi Arabia continued unabated.

My indifference of years before was now replaced by obsession. I followed every twist and turn with boyish enthusiasm. In November 1990, I listened intently to Margaret Thatcher telling the Brits her government had decided to increase troop numbers. Earlier that year, the British 7th Armoured Brigade had been sent to Saudi Arabia, but now that force would be quadrupled with the addition of an armoured division totalling 25,500 men and women. It was a huge commitment and there was palpable excitement over who would be going and who would miss out. I was coming to the end of my two-year exchange commanding a British tank squadron in West Germany. My regiment, the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards, was an old and well-respected one, but I was devastated to learn that they were to be overlooked; the old 1970s Chieftain tanks of the

regiment were passed over in favour of units equipped with newer Challenger tanks. The disappointment around the barracks hung like a dense black cloud.

But I was determined to get a run. I lobbied my commanding officer repeatedly to find me a spot. He promised to do his best but I didn't want to leave anything to chance. I decided to exploit my friendship with my commanding officer's boss, the brigade commander, Brigadier Mike Walker. Walker would later rise to head the entire British Armed Forces. I wrote him a pleading letter. Later I marched into his office. The genial brigadier saw my anxiety and promised to do his best. He ended our meeting with a prophetic, 'Be careful what you wish for, John.'

I had long discussions with Jane about why I wanted to charge off to war. We'd been married for nearly fourteen years and had shared the joy of two sons. While I had everything a man could hope for, Jane understood this was something I had to do, otherwise I would always regret being denied the chance to prove myself in battle. But she also expressed her dread: 'What would I ever do without you?'

My reasons for going were entirely selfish and I had no adequate response. Instead, I offered her an out. If she said 'No', I wouldn't go, and that would be the end of it. The conflicting emotions were etched on her face but she gave me her blessing. 'I will worry endlessly about you, but I know you will always regret not going. If the commanding officer or brigadier asks how I feel, tell them you have my full support.'

I embraced her tightly. I loved her for it.

After an anxious wait, on 26 November 1990 I was summoned by my commanding officer to be told, 'Brigadier Mike has come through. A job has been found for you out in the desert. Now, John, would you please not jump the chain of command like that again …' began his mild rebuke. I was hardly listening. I had not been directed to some hack job, buried in the rear.

I had been selected to work directly for the respected General Officer Commanding 1st Armoured Division, Major General Rupert Smith, as his operations liaison officer. I would be assigned to the forward combat units to keep him informed.

Fizzing with excitement, I raced home to our modest married quarters adjacent to the barracks to share the news with Jane. ‘I’m off to war!’ I said triumphantly. Outwardly, she shared my joy, somehow masking her anxiety for my sake. I also told our two boys that I was going off to the war that they’d seen on the television. David, ten, understood but Daniel, just five, quickly moved on to much more fascinating stories about *his* adventures that day.

As I counted down the days until my deployment, I worked on my weapons proficiency and fitness, tearing along the tractor paths and lanes through the German fields, telling myself I was training for war. War! The idea filled me with excitement. Reality was yet to raise its ugly head.

On 28 November I received confirmation of my appointment and was ordered to attend briefings on 3 December at 1st Division headquarters, two hours’ drive to the north. In the meantime I refreshed my basic first-aid skills and tried to learn a few words of Arabic. I was issued a new kit, which included three sets of NBC (nuclear, biological and chemical) suits. Dispensing with the useless British Army sleeping bag, I bought a lightweight down-filled bag and a compact Magna-light torch with a red filter—a torch that would later save my life.

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I arrived at the divisional area on a miserable European winter’s day. A steady, cold drizzle fell from a slate-grey sky, soaking the huge red-brick buildings and the bare trees. A solitary Land Rover trailer, painted light

desert tan, was parked in the centre of the main parade ground, a pathetic, slightly comical sight. The vast impending deployment was hidden from view. I introduced myself to several officers and met up with others I knew. All talk was of the Gulf and our part in this grand adventure.

The big briefing session the next day was an eye-opener. The intelligence staff began with a hair-raising description of Iraq's equipment, most of it sourced from the Soviet regime but strengthened with modern western combat systems provided by French, British, American and other European arms dealers. The Iraqis defending Kuwait and the nearby Iraqi territory were thought to total some 400,000 to 500,000 troops. Half a million men! This was followed by a sketchy operations briefing; we really had no clear idea of our role. All we knew was that we would have to evict the Iraqi Army from Kuwait. British soldiers were already out in the baking desert sun. Pictures of sunburnt 'squaddies' had been splashed across the newspapers for months. Soon, it would be our turn.

The commanding general, Rupert Smith, then stood, a lanky figure with a generous head of brown hair above clear eyes. He looked fit, fresh and energetic, yet exuded that calm self-deprecatory air that I'd come to recognise in many senior British military leaders. He spoke of the need for accuracy and confidence. I would be working for him directly so I was keen to get a read on him, and I introduced myself straight after the briefings. The introduction went well.

The program of flights to move the thousands of soldiers out to the Gulf was announced. My group would depart in a little over two weeks' time.

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The day of my departure, 17 December, dawned cold and grey. I said farewell to Jane, David and Daniel at the German hotel where we had been staying in anticipation of their journey home to Australia. Both Jane and David cried. Daniel tried to look serious. I was racked with guilt over leaving Jane with the two boys and the job of packing up and moving back to Australia while I flew out to the Gulf on my big adventure. Even more, I felt selfish—so eager to dash off to a war that might well kill me and leave Jane a widow, my boys fatherless and my parents bereaved. I was tormented, but the whole inexorable process was now sweeping us all along. I held Jane and told her, and myself, it would be all right.

I was composed until I climbed into a waiting car with a British army driver, who then had the pleasure of watching an Australian officer wiping away tears for the first kilometre of the journey. The enormity of what I was doing hit me—the campaign was expected to be a bloodbath on both sides, and I had chosen to put my family through an uncertain future. I drove first to my own unit to collect my pistol and other equipment, then onwards to meet up with my deploying group.

Unbeknownst to me as I was marshalling my emotions, the wife of one of the sergeants in my squadron, a lovely lady called Angie, had arrived at the hotel and scooped up a distressed Jane and the boys, taking them to her home for dinner—a simple act of kindness. Ironically, Jane had been sternly lectured before this by the commanding officer's wife on the pitfalls of becoming too friendly with the soldiers' wives. This concept did not sit well with Jane, an unpretentious country girl, and she made friends with many of the wives of the more junior soldiers.

While Angie consoled Jane, I joined hundreds of other soldiers in a massive, ice-cold hangar at Hanover airport as we waited to board a commercial flight to take us to the Gulf. We saw the British Secretary of State, Tom King, step from his car at the entrance to the hangar. He

circulated the space, speaking to the soldiers and posing for photographs. Noticing my Australian camouflage uniform in the crowd, he beckoned me over for a friendly conversation, which drew the attention of a television crew and reporters from *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. Fame at last.

There were echoes of past departures on military adventures: groups of soldiers eager to be off, slightly uncomfortable politicians sending them on their way, cameramen capturing the moment, and above all a palpable feeling of excitement that grew as the departure drew nearer. Finally we were called forward to form a ragged queue at the foot of each of the two stairways up to the aircraft. The wind howled past us, and we were grateful to get on board. Civilian cabin crew directed us to our seats, which had been reconfigured for maximum density. The huge jet whined to life and our journey began. There were no cheers when we left the ground.

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We arrived at Dhahran in Saudi Arabia at 1.20 a.m. local time. Warm, dry air washed over us as we disembarked to board buses for Al Jubail, a housing camp attached to a petrochemical plant on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, on the Persian Gulf. Exotic smells mingled with the pungent stink of petrochemicals drifting from the industrial area. After another round of briefings and standing in queues to complete our processing, we were shown to the grim concrete barracks where I would share a room with several other officers. I seized the bottom bunk, a great prize. I dragged off my boots and clammy uniform and hung my loaded pistol from the end of my steel-framed bunk. It was my first day in a theatre of war, 19 December 1990. I collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

3

INTO THE BREACH

As soon as I see the hand jutting out of the earth I know it will haunt me—a permanent reminder of this dreadful, awful day. I see the wounded, with blood seeping from bandages where shrapnel or bullets have torn through flesh and bone. I know our bombs have turned men into pink mist. I hear reports that some of our own are dead and I know the lives of their families will be forever damaged. But that one image, of a hand reaching out from where a man has been ploughed into the sand, stays with me like a splinter under the skin of my soul.

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It is 0538 on 24 February 1991: my first day on a real battlefield. The lead elements of the American 1st Brigade have crossed into Iraq. I hear reports of good progress, light resistance, no mines so far. Then, suddenly the airwaves come alive: ‘Contact! Enemy defensive complex! Enemy in trenches!’ The lead troops are hitting the first of the Iraqi lines of defence. More reports stream in and I hear orders for an attack crackling across the network.

While sections of the Iraqi defence are fighting fiercely, we hear that in other places dozens of enemy soldiers are abandoning their posts and walking forward, with hands raised. ‘There’s a bunch of them surrendering,

white flags and all. They're coming down the slope. There must be a hundred or more!' comes one message.

Cocooned in our vehicle, the boys and I are excited by our early success. We cheer them on. 'I wish we were closer so I could see the prisoners,' Pete says. I too am eager to get amongst it, but for the moment we have to wait.

I hear Colonel Maggart on the radio: surrendering enemy must be moved out of the way so he can get on with the advance. There are now around 200 Iraqis, maybe more, coming up onto the rise occupied by the American troops. Some are holding fluttering white scraps of cloth. Infantrymen spill out of their Bradley fighting vehicles to take charge of them. 'Try to get some trucks up here,' I hear the commander telling his staff. But every logistics vehicle I've seen is fully loaded with fuel, ammunition and other stores. 'Bring up the lowboy transporters,' Maggart orders, meaning the large low trailers used to transport the mine plough tanks, now empty of their loads. 'We'll use them to move the prisoners to the rear.'

There's a lull—maybe half an hour or more, it's hard to gauge—and then the first Iraqi prisoners appear near where we wait, some on trucks, others on foot and herded into groups, shuffling in our direction. Through my binoculars I see that most are dressed in thin, olive-drab coats over tan uniforms. They are bearded, unkempt and sorry-looking. American soldiers appear to take charge of them, the first prisoners of war I have ever seen. 'Shit,' says Pete with some surprise in his voice, 'they look pathetic.'

Steve clambers up out of the hatch to get a look. 'Hey, one of 'em's been shot or something!' he says, peering through the binoculars. An Iraqi has dressings on his head and neck, and is assisted in his shambling progress by a fellow prisoner.

‘Fuck!’ exclaims Pete. This is not a bunch of guys pretending to be the enemy on yet another war game in the Australian scrub. These are real prisoners, real people.

The thumping of artillery resumes, directed at the Iraqis still holding out. I tell Steve to flick me onto the British radio net so I can send a situation report, a SITREP. He takes another peek at the battlefield, then ducks back inside. The British are kilometres behind but the signal is clear and I report the good initial progress, the extent of resistance and an estimate of prisoners taken. ‘The Americans are preparing to begin the assault through the minefield belt in front of the main Iraqi defensive line,’ I say and sign off, telling them I’ll report again when the attack begins. Inwardly, I am pleased, feeling smug to be reporting from the battle zone to a man many kilometres away from the shooting. Don’t get too cocky, hero, I remind myself. This is just the start.

An American soldier, standing in the turret of his vehicle next to ours, raises his arm and signals the advance. ‘We’re moving, Pete,’ I say to the driver as I drop back into my hatch. The dozen or so vehicles in our command group fall into two columns and with a slight jerk, our vehicle starts to move too. A stinking cloud of engine exhaust washes over me. We’re advancing to combat. Another ripple of excitement surges through me. The desert stretches out ahead of us, tattooed by the tracks of tanks and Bradleys.

Small details catch my attention. The yellowy sand is still damp from the heavy rain of two days ago and is dotted with gravel and small dark stones. Low clumps of thorny grass, stunted but green, jut through in places. Rain passes in a series of grey veils, yet a fine fog of sand is whipped up by the wind. Rubbish thrown out of one of the other vehicles is scattered by the wind.

Ahead I see the berm looming, marking the border. The Iraqi defences lie just beyond it. I can hear the occasional explosion over the grinding noise of the engine. We are ordered to stop short of the berm. The vehicles in our small convoy steer into a defensive position, an imaginary clock face on the desert floor. The largest vehicles in our group, the humpbacked command and control vehicles, whiskered with half a dozen antennas, take the twelve o'clock position. I slot our wagon in beside them and tell Pete to kill the engine. I trot across to the command and control vehicles as their rear ramps lever downwards to the sand, revealing signalmen already chattering on the radios inside—like roadside traders, open for the business of war.

Standing at the side of the ramp, I listen to the radio reports. The smokers, unable to light up, satisfy their cravings by chewing tobacco, and every few minutes soldiers emerge to hoick their nicotine slime onto the ramp. I glean information for my next SITREP but am interrupted by a radio exchange between Colonel Maggart—who is in a vehicle further forward—and his boss, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division, Major General Tom Rhame. I had briefly met the general when he called on my British commander to discuss the assault. It had been just a quick handshake but his energy had been obvious—he has a reputation as a 'hard charger'. And now he wants to know if Maggart can attack the main Iraqi defences straight away, rather than wait for a fully fledged artillery preparation. Across the front, the attack is going better than expected and plans are being redrawn to maintain momentum.

A decision is reached. The attack on the main minefield belts and defensive line will be launched in a few hours, well ahead of schedule, coordinated with 2nd Brigade on our right. The artillery bombardment, originally intended to last three hours, will be shortened to an all-out mass barrage of just thirty minutes.

I am still standing there scribbling in my notebook when a terrifying message flashes across every radio: the Iraqis in Kuwait are wearing full chemical warfare dress. I feel a gut-wrenching jolt of fear. Chemical warfare! I reach for the satchel on my left hip containing my gasmask and gloves and see a couple of others do the same. But some of the soldiers seem not to have understood. An officer rapidly explains: ‘If the Iraqis are suiting up, that can only mean they plan to use chemical weapons. If they plan to release nerve agent or some other stuff in Kuwait we could be in for the same treatment here.’

The colour drains from the face of the young radio operator closest to the rear door. ‘Make sure the boss knows,’ says another officer. Someone makes the call, and I hear Maggart’s curt ‘Roger, got that.’ He tells his staff to wait for confirmation before putting the brigade into the full chemical regalia—gasmasks and rubber gloves in addition to our suits and boots. This could drastically complicate our advance. I leave my hand on the top of my gasmask. The risk of being caught in a nerve agent attack is my deepest fear. Messages bounce back and forth, discussing the likelihood of a chemical attack and the need to don our chemical gear.

I jog back to our vehicle to brief the boys. They’ve already heard the news and hit me with a barrage of questions. I tell them we won’t go to the highest level until we get confirmation, but I remind them to make sure their masks and gloves are close at all times. Although there is some doubt about the report from Kuwait, it is still worrying—we have far superior conventional weaponry but this is one way the Iraqis could even the odds. Death by nerve agent is horrible. It attacks the victim in seconds, hyper-accelerating the nervous system and overwhelming the body’s organs. Mustard gas causes hideous burns and skin lesions, which continue to develop hours after exposure.

I leave my fretting crew and return to the command vehicle as another message arrives: the report from Kuwait, it seems, is inaccurate and the warning is discounted. ‘Thank God,’ I say to myself as relief washes over all of us.

God! I find myself praying that someone is looking out for me; as the old cliché goes, even atheists turn to heaven in times of battle. A few weeks ago I attended a simple religious service in a tent with a dozen others, despite my scant church attendance over many years. The padre’s sermon was interrupted several times by the thumping of aircraft dropping bombs in the distance. My parents are devout Catholics and I went along partly for them—it’s what they’d hope I would do—but I also found it comforting, like an old coat.

The officers return their attention to the upcoming assault.

Ahead, black smoke hugs the horizon, a dramatic backdrop as more prisoners come tramping past us. Most have surrendered without much of a fight, although Iraqi defenders still occupy a low ridge not far from the advancing troops. The inconsistent resistance is creating some confusion but there is no real brake on our progress. Then a disturbing report buzzes over the network: an Iraqi soldier has walked towards his captors to surrender, then detonated explosives hidden under his coat. No Americans have been hurt but several Iraqis standing near him have been. What motivates someone to do that? What effect will this have on the US soldiers when they are confronted by other surrendering Iraqis? I sure as hell will be leery of every prisoner who comes my way. Might this useless suicidal act cost other Iraqis their lives?

An hour or more passes. Ahead of us the American troops have been in continuous contact with the enemy even as they prepare for the major assault. I have spoken to my headquarters again, confirming our new H-Hour, the time for our assault on the Iraqi defences: it’s to take place at

1500 hours, now less than an hour away. Despite the regular radio messages from the leading troops, I feel out of touch—I need to get forward to see for myself, so I can report clearly to my British headquarters. I fidget briefly then make a decision: I'm going. I tell an officer near the tobacco-slicked ramp that I'm heading forward to meet up with Colonel Maggart. I stride to my vehicle, jump through the rear door and brief the guys. I have map coordinates for the colonel's general location jotted in my notebook and carefully enter the data in the state-of-the-art Magellan satellite navigation device—the size of a couple of house bricks—that I've been issued. Pete guns the motor; I give him general directions and we head north, towards the border.

The tank tracks form narrowing arrowhead scars in the sand where they have converged to breach the berm. I guide Pete to a gap. Bumping over the gouged earth, I glance at my watch and jerk out my notebook to scribble down the time. It is 1409. We have crossed into Iraq.

It's good to be moving. Other vehicles are heading in the same direction to support the upcoming assault—an artillery unit, lumbering fuel trucks, vehicles laden with ammunition. As we drive northwards, chasing the forward battalions, I hear Colonel Maggart issuing orders over the radio. Off to one side, a rocket artillery unit is already firing. US artillery is punishing the brave who refuse to surrender, but others have given up hope and more Iraqi prisoners stream in. This is just a preliminary softening up; the main bombardment is not far away now. I watch the readout on the Magellan, directing Pete with short commands to where I think Colonel Maggart is.

As we get nearer, we start to run into the rear of the assaulting groups; tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles are everywhere. There are several groups of American vehicles near the crest of a larger rise and I head for the centre. As we roll up behind one promising group, the sky suddenly falls on

the next ridge—it's like nothing I have ever witnessed before. The preparatory artillery bombardment for the main attack has begun, and we have a front-row seat.

Seeing these stupendous barrages from afar is one thing, but here they penetrate your very being. Like the fury of a raging bushfire up close, it is simultaneously horrible and awesome. The immense power of the assault holds me transfixed. Even with the headset on I hear the rattle of the shells racing overhead, plummeting towards their targets. I duck instinctively, dropping into my hatch so that only my helmet protrudes. The ridgeline ahead erupts in fire. Explosions appear to rend other explosions. Sprays of shrapnel scour the sand in all directions. I assume Iraqi defenders are under this scything storm but I see nothing but bursting shells and smoke. Rockets join the melee, adding to the winking of thousands of exploding bomblets. The entire ridge—everywhere in front of us—is exploding with fire.

It is a glimpse into Hell.

The relentless brutality continues for half an hour. Bomb after bomb after bomb. Steve clambers up for a look. 'Holy fuck,' he says, delivered without inflection or colour.

It is 1500 hours. As the final gale of high explosives sweeps across the Iraqis, the relative calm where we wait is torn apart by the firing of dozens of American tanks, arranged imperfectly along the ridge. They employ volley fire, designed to deliver a knockout blow. Phosphorous tracer elements in the tail of each projectile burn red hot, revealing the flat trajectories of each round, before being consumed in the wall of smoke that now envelops the enemy-held ridge. I hear the lead elements reporting on the radio, 'Ploughs are down!' The mine-clearing tanks have lowered their huge, metal-toothed bulldozer blades and are pushing forward into the minefields, shoving aside half a metre or more of sand and its deadly burden of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

Still standing in the hatch of my armoured vehicle, I hear more tanks firing. The rattle of machine guns starts. I recognise the slightly uneven beat of a .50 calibre machine gun, like a jackhammer: it's the secondary weapon on the tanks and other armoured vehicles. There are long bursts of fire. Next comes the thump of Bradley cannon fire. The major assault to smash a hole in the Iraqi defensive belt is underway.

I spot a Bradley still high up on the ridge, with another two or three in close company. A man stands tall in the turret, binoculars trained ahead. I figure it's Colonel Maggart. I need to get details to report back to the Brits, but I must get off my vehicle to walk to his. To my left rear I see a set of vehicle tracks cutting at right angles across the ruts leading to Colonel Maggart's Bradley. I clamber over the top of our vehicle then drop into one of the track marks—there are likely to be mines and I'm taking all precautions, using the tracks as a cleared path. As I hit the sand it occurs to me that I am standing on Iraqi soil. The significance of this echoes in my mind briefly as I stand staring at the sand on either side of me for indications of mines. Then, with an intake of breath, I walk carefully along the furrows to get to the brigade commander's vehicle. A couple of officers stand close to the lowered ramp, leaning in occasionally to listen to the radios within. I cast a suspicious glance at the ground as I step out of the vehicle track. One of the officers recognises me and greets me with a terse, 'Welcome to Iraq, Major,' then turns back to business.

I make this trip several times over the next hour, reporting back to my British headquarters. My protective boots are heavy and I work up a sweat inside my chemical suit despite the chill.

Back in our wagon, I am filing another radio report when there is a series of explosions just in front of us. A loud metallic snap sounds on the front of our vehicle—we've been hit by something! The explosions are artillery and it's falling close. That snapping sound was a piece of shrapnel.

‘Shit!’ swears Pete as I scramble past him to get to the hatch, reaching up to pull the lid down.

I stare out of the small rectangular blocks of thick glass used as observation slits and see a shell burst in the sand between us and Colonel Maggart’s vehicle—not far from where I’d just been walking. It throws up a splash of sand and grey smoke. I hear other shells land on the far side of the ridge, on the forward slope. The attack is short-lived, only half a dozen rounds or so. There is conjecture over the radio about the possibility of friendly fire but this is quickly discounted. Part of the Iraqi artillery force is alive and active. We wait for a period; time seems suspended as we wonder if more shells are about to fall on us. Eventually I decide that the danger has passed and I climb back out and make my way back along the tracks, past the hidden mines, this time with an eye to the sky.

Colonel Maggart has decided to move through the newly cleared lanes in the minefields to join the lead troops that have begun attacking the Iraqi trenches and bunkers. His vehicle is already moving while I’m part way back to my own and I sprint the last 20 or so metres, careless of mines. I launch myself through the rear door and scramble up to my hatch, yelling at Pete to get moving and follow the colonel’s Bradley. Pete is driving with his head out his hatch until I order him to close down—we’ll be vulnerable to enemy fire as we cross the constricted lanes ahead.

Our advance is soon halted and we are bunched up in the lanes caught in a traffic jam.

At that moment more Iraqi artillery falls, landing around us in a pattern across the lanes. I hear Colonel Maggart shouting over the radio. He is again worried this might be friendly fire but he is quickly told otherwise. A vehicle has been hit and a soldier has been badly wounded. A private runs forward through the artillery with a tow line to pull the stranded vehicle clear of the lane.

More artillery rounds fall. We all swear. ‘Thank God you made us close down, boss,’ breathes Pete over the intercom. Finally we are moving again and join the command group just as more artillery rounds land nearby. No-one speaks. We just sit and wait, wondering if the next shell will land on top of us, until the bombardment ends.

Over the next hour or two we jostle forward as Colonel Maggart positions himself to view the battle. One of the companies fighting its way forward is that of John Bushyhead, the Cherokee officer I met yesterday. I listen in intently as his team battles to overwhelm an Iraqi defensive position, Objective 4kD. Bushyhead’s men are being attacked by rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades and respond with cannons and machine-gun fire. We hear the roar of a rocket-propelled mine-clearing charge being fired; this system uses a rocket to drag a thick hose filled with explosives out across a minefield, creating massive overpressure which instantly clears a lane 100 metres long. Bushyhead’s men have fired it directly across the Iraqi trenches. The effect on an infantry position doesn’t bear thinking about.

Bushyhead orders his infantrymen and tanks forward, shooting or burying the surviving Iraqis. Of an enemy force on Objective 4kD of sixty or more, only two bodies and four prisoners are found; the rest are buried underground. You’re a combat veteran now, John Bushyhead, I think.

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After a time, we unbutton our hatches and emerge into the slowly fading light. The sights that surround us are not unexpected, but are unsettling. The sand is churned by tracks and pitted with shell holes, some gaping pits from the heavier rounds. Jagged chunks of shrapnel litter the ground, wickedly sharp edges glinting in the weak sunlight now washing across the

battlefield. The battle has moved on a little, but the carnage of its passing is everywhere: Iraqi armoured vehicles, including two tanks, burn fiercely; a partly buried bunker sits crushed and smouldering; wire snakes across the ground, chopped and shredded. The sound of firing comes and goes, occasionally reaching a crescendo. At one point I realise our relatively thin-skinned personnel carrier is sitting too high on the ridge and is vulnerable to return fire from the Iraqis. ‘Back us up, Pete,’ I order. Pete engages reverse with a clunk and we roll backwards, as I lean out to see past the cargo of stores lashed across our rear deck.

Suddenly there are two explosions right under our vehicle. ‘Shit!’ someone shouts over the intercom. ‘What was that?’

‘Stop! Stop!’ I shout to Pete, not bothering to use the intercom but leaning towards him and banging on the metal plate near his shoulder. ‘Halt!’

There is a kind of silence, despite the battle up ahead. I half-crawl out from my hatch and peer over the side where the sound has come from. On the sand, just metres from the left-hand track, sit dozens of small unexploded bomblets, dull and menacing in the overcast light. Each is roughly the size of a Coke can, with short canvas ribbons tethered to the top to stabilise them after being released from the carrier rocket. There’s a small crater under us, and I see another just ahead of the vehicle. We have driven over several bomblets as we reversed and they’ve exploded under our vehicle.

‘Christ,’ I breathe over the intercom. ‘We’re surrounded by unexploded bomblets!’ The entire slope is dotted with them, in threes and fours or alone, thickly grouped in one place, spread thinly elsewhere. They are lethal leftovers from the earlier Coalition artillery bombardments that haven’t detonated on the soft, wet sand. I’d heard there was the possibility of rocket bombardments and cluster bombs producing a small percentage of duds in

terrain like this, but it is clear that much of each rocket load has failed to detonate. I have guided our vehicle right into a field of them.

As I steady my nerves, the radio announces that a US infantry soldier has been killed and others wounded by bomblets just like these. ‘Poor bastard,’ says Steve of the dead soldier. There is no response, just silent agreement. We drive forward, meticulously tracing our old tracks.

The attacking Americans are clearing the extensive Iraqi trench systems. The sounds of sporadic battle drift back over the sand. I see the spark of a distant muzzle flash as a tank fires. A second later, the noise reaches us. The radios buzz and snap. There is some resistance but progress is good, and news of it comes in a quickfire summary from one of the lead commanders: ‘Large numbers of prisoners captured.’ There is a flurry of activity when an enemy artillery position is identified.

As the battle continues we change our location several times, shadowing Colonel Maggart’s vehicle. During one move I see the hand, reaching up out of the sand. As we roll past, my head swivels to follow it for ten, maybe twenty seconds.

The hand belongs to an Iraqi soldier, buried alive. It protrudes from one of the trenches caved in by the attacking tanks, just as planned. There is another partly buried lump just beyond it, the back of a man perhaps, but it is the hand that seizes my attention as we pass. I wonder if the man shoved it up through the sand in a final grasp at life or if he was simply entombed in that position. For these few seconds I can’t take my eyes off it. And then it disappears behind me.

What passes for sunset has come and gone. Darkness has enveloped the battlefield. It is late, nearly 2200. Time has been elastic; what felt like minutes has been hours, or the reverse. Several hours have passed since Colonel Maggart ordered the assault to cease; it was difficult to tell friend from foe on the congested battlefield in the dark. We have followed him to

the meet-up with the commander of one of the tank battalions. We park a little distance away, isolated by our status as outsiders.

To the northeast a large ridge remains uncleared of the enemy. The forward troops have reported that it is dotted with bunkers and several tanks, but there will be no further advance tonight. More than 450 prisoners have now been herded to the rear.

Now it is almost midnight. It has been a long day, one of constant strain as I've tried to pick nuggets of information from the stream of reports, rapid conversations and marker-smeared maps. My mind is brimming with what I've witnessed, but most of all I remember the hand.

I am at a loss to explain why I found this tiny speck of death in this devastated landscape so unsettling. There may have been dozens of men buried in that trench, but the hand seemed to be reaching out for help. Was that silent appeal meant for me? Do I feel guilty because I didn't say more when I was briefed on this plan? I was cheering the air force on, like a one-eyed supporter at a footy match, as they dropped bombs on the Iraqi artillery a few hours earlier, knowing men would be blown to pieces.

At the ramp of Colonel Maggart's vehicle I hear orders for a dawn attack to clear the last defended ridge. The attack is timed for 0600 hours.

4

THE BRITISH UNLEASHED

A short but very deep sleep ends with a shove. I look around in confusion, momentarily disorientated, until the dull red light on the metal racks and dials brings my mind into focus and I realise where I am—in the rear of our armoured personnel carrier. It is the second day of the ground war.

Steve is sitting hunched in his sleeping bag, radio handset pressed to his ear. In this light his features are deep-set and wolfish. ‘Thanks for that, Steve,’ I mumble. ‘What time is it now?’

‘Just gone 0430,’ comes his low-pitched reply. ‘Want a coffee?’

Pete wrestles his arms free from his sleeping bag on the floor and in silence we coax our battered gas burner into life, fill a pot, prepare our mugs, then slurp on the bitter brew, hugging the metal cups for warmth.

In accordance with last night’s orders, at dawn—0600 hours—the American 1st Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division will coordinate an assault with the 2nd Brigade on our right, to clear the last resistance from the Iraqi lines around where we have breached their defences.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘We need to make sure we are stowed and ready for the day. Pete, I don’t want you walking around outside unless there is no other choice—there are mines and bomblets everywhere—but I want you to check the oil, fuel level and the lashings on the top deck of the wagon.’

‘Sure, boss,’ he replies.

‘And Steve,’ I say, turning to where he still sits listening to the radio traffic, ‘do a check of the codes for the day and confirm that everyone has

their accountable items,' referring to our weapons and other serial-numbered items that must be reconciled every day.

I throw down the last of the tepid coffee and stumble past Pete, still in his sleeping bag, to the rear door. 'Lights out,' I order, waiting for the red light to be extinguished before I crack the handle on the door to open it and lever myself out into the darkness, pulling on my helmet as I go.

The cold hits me immediately. It is raining lightly and the wind drives it into my face. The night is inky black, and even after I wait several minutes to let my eyes adjust, the outlines of the tracks to Colonel Maggart's vehicle are vague. I have my small red torch with me and I flick it on before setting off.

A flapping piece of canvas marks the entrance to a small briefing tent between two Bradley fighting vehicles. Inside, only two men are visible, one talking on the radio. After a bit, I realise that Colonel Maggart and the CO of the US tank battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor—or 2-34 Armor—are off in a corner in muted conversation. I leave them be, instead asking one of the other officers for a short update, which I scribble into my notebook. There is nothing substantially new, so I take a moment to review the plan.

The assault is less than an hour away. The 1st Brigade will attack two Iraqi defensive positions in sequence. One enemy position will be assaulted by the brigade's infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry, the 1-15 Infantry. It will attack from east to west, hinging around the flank of 2-34 Armor before swinging north. The tanks will then drive north in concert with the infantry to hit the second objective, while the remaining tank battalion and a cavalry outfit will move to secure supporting positions. It sounds a bit complex, especially as there will be poor light. There is also confusion about the Iraqi numbers and the state of their defences. But the battle plan is locked in. The commanders will rely on their men to sort

through the chaos and make good decisions on the fly—this is how battles have always been fought.

With fifteen minutes to go before the attack, I make my way back to our vehicle and haul myself inside to the relative warmth of our little refuge. I make a brief report to my headquarters, still far to the south, adding that I hope to be in a position to tell them to start their advance through the breach area sometime around midday. The operator is terse and I am told not to delay passing on the message. It's obvious there is anxiety at the other end. I acknowledge their concerns and promise to do the job I've been assigned, but I am annoyed by their impatience. Surely they must have some idea how difficult all this is? The sign-off from the other end is frosty.

But it's soon forgotten and I stand in my hatch, gulping a barely warm satchel of slop, watching the light steal into the cloudy sky just as the first Bradleys begin their advance covered by the usual crushing artillery fire. The tanks around us also surge forward. A tank on the extreme right flank dumps fuel into its exhaust to create billowing smoke as a marker for the infantry on their right. There is heavy fire from the American tanks and the Bradleys. There are reports of multiple bunkers, smashed by high-explosive tank shells just as the American infantry reach them. I hear urgent reports of enemy infantry in the trenches to our front. 'Dismounts are on the ground!' comes one message as infantry soldiers exit their Bradleys and begin fighting from the ground. From this distance I can't see them through the smoke and mist but I have watched and done this drill so many times that I can visualise it clearly. Despite all the modern machinery, soldiers charging an enemy in a contest for their lives is as ancient as war itself.

In my mind's eye I see their vehicles race forward towards the enemy. The men are jammed tightly in the passenger compartment, pressed shoulder to shoulder, bulky with body armour and webbed harnesses for

ammunition, radios and first-aid kits. The sergeant in charge listens on his headset, then turns to shout instructions to his squad above the roar of the engine. ‘Get ready!’ he bellows. ‘Dismount in thirty seconds! Remember, assault line to the right of the vehicle. The right side!’ He tosses the headset aside as the men grasp their weapons, now with all eyes on the rear door, waiting for it to open, fearful of what will follow but willing it to start, to end this tension. Some of the men growl, psyching themselves up. Others remain silent.

The vehicle lurches to a halt, rocking forward on its suspension. Cannon fire erupts from the main armament, spraying the ground ahead with thumb-sized explosive projectiles to cover the vulnerable period while the infantry dismount. The door unlatches with a bang, hinging from its base as the whole rear of the vehicle drops down to form a shallow ramp. The first man out dashes across the falling ramp even before its far edge strikes the sand. Others rush out behind him. They are well-drilled and know exactly where to go. Rushing from the rear of the vehicle they run to the side of the Bradley, spreading out beside it to take up prone positions in the assault line. The thumping crash of the cannon fire is punctuated by the first rifle shots as the men sight the enemy positions. A fire team rears up and rushes forward, and other small teams follow, bounding ahead in short rushes, supported by fire from those not moving. The Bradley rolls forward slowly to keep pace, still firing its cannon. The noise is enveloping, and the men shout and roar to be heard. The first trench comes close. There! Enemy soldiers! Shoot! Again! A few bursts of poorly aimed fire come back towards the infantrymen, then suddenly there are hands appearing in the enemy trench, arms raised in surrender. They’re quitting!

The men run forward as one now, shouting orders at the cringing Iraqis, which they understand well enough despite the language barrier. ‘Don’t fucking move! Don’t move, motherfucker!’ bellow the Americans. ‘Get out

of the goddamned trench! Out! Out!' They gesture with the barrels of their M16 rifles. The terrified Iraqis get it. Several are already pulling themselves up out of the narrow, chest-deep channel.

The Americans, adrenaline surging, reach down to haul them out, dumping them face first on the sand. 'Search them!' yells the sergeant, striding up and down the line, and men bend to check their captives. Others jump down into the trench, throwing out assault rifles and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. 'Shit! Look at this stuff!' says one young infantryman, reaching to grab one of the rifles and hefting it. 'I got myself a fuckin' AK-47!'

Despite this complex choreography of armoured vehicles and men, the attack goes well. Dozens more prisoners are taken, including an Iraqi battalion commander and other officers. An Iraqi artillery battery is captured intact with thirty rounds laid out ready for firing next to each gun. We've beaten them to the punch. By mid-morning our artillery shifts to targets behind the positions we are assaulting, then further north and east, preparing for the upcoming British attack. A reorganisation is ordered, the signal to cease the attack and start consolidating. We haven't moved more than a hundred metres, content to wait on the rise with a view of the Iraqi trenches while the Americans attack and secure vital higher ground off to the north. Thankfully—amazingly—there are no American casualties, apart from yet another soldier wounded by stepping on an unexploded bomblet. Numerous Iraqis require medical aid, mostly for shrapnel wounds. We can account for a few enemy deaths, but mostly they lie entombed in their collapsed trenches. Some of the survivors trudge back past us in small groups, disarmed, dishonoured and cold, but relieved to be alive.

Around us, the greasy smoke of still-smouldering Iraqi tanks and other armoured vehicles swirls into my face, stinging my eyes and throat. During one short move to a better observation point, we encounter a scene

reminiscent of the battlefields of World War I—the surface of the desert is pock-marked by overlapping shell craters, large and small, littered with jagged hunks of shrapnel, a few bloodied bits of clothing and body parts. Some are partially filled by rainwater, others smoke with silent menace. The pervading stink of cordite rises from the spent artillery and tank rounds, and the occasional squall of rain does nothing to dispel it. I look at this scene, quietly amazed, and somewhat surprised by how commonplace it has suddenly become.

The forward troops gather fallen weapons, piling captured equipment and herding prisoners to the rear. There are now dozens of fuel trucks trundling around, refuelling the tanks and Bradleys. We pull alongside one, and Steve and I wrestle with our load to get access to the refuelling caps while Pete stays in his driver's seat in case we need to move. Our tanks filled, we cut away and roll back towards Colonel Maggart's vehicle. He waves and we stop close so I can jump across to his wagon without dismounting.

'John,' he shouts over the engine noise, 'it's time we got ready for the Brits to come through. Lieutenant Colonel Dan Magee is my Assistant Crossing Area Commander for this phase; he's a very capable guy but I think it would be great if you could help out a little, to make sure the British units are moving through in the right order. We want to avoid any confusion like we had during the rehearsals,' he says, referring to the out-of-sequence arrival of a British medical unit in the middle of a tank assault during one of our practice runs a few weeks earlier. It seems like an eternity ago now, but I recall clearly the unease I felt walking in the dummy minefield lanes, trying to sort out the mess in the dark. I hope not to repeat the experience with real mines. 'Do you think your boss would agree to you being Dan's assistant for a while?' Maggart asks.

I mull it over briefly and make a decision. ‘I’m sure that’s the sort of thing that he’d want me to do; anything that helps the passage of lines go smoothly has to be a good idea,’ I say. ‘I’ll let my headquarters know.’

‘Great!’ he replies. ‘Go find Dan and let him know that you’ll be assisting him today and tonight.’

I am familiar with Magee, having seen a lot of him in his role as brigade executive officer. He and I hit it off from the outset, and the fact that he is now my temporary boss suits me. I’d last seen him just before the initial attack yesterday morning, and he greets me now with a firm handshake and a clap on the shoulder. ‘Okay, John,’ he says, ‘let’s get ourselves to where we’ll oversee the passage of lines by your British buddies. We’ll find ourselves a clear spot near the minefield lanes and set up shop there.’ We briefly discuss options, then set off with his vehicle in the lead. Driving south, we pass more smashed and burning vehicles and small groups of dejected prisoners. The rain has eased slightly and the day has brightened.

We settle on a low rise overlooking lanes Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot and Golf, for which we are responsible. Delta and Echo have been combined into one wide lane to facilitate the movement of vehicles in tactical formation rather than single file. We decide to park close together but not share our tent-like extensions. I want to be able to take my vehicle off for short independent tasks if necessary. I order the boys to put up our camouflage net and it takes a bit of time to unbundle it, stretch it over poles and peg it down in the damp sand. I take a photo of our little headquarters. It looks squared away and business-like. The multiple antennas spiking the air on both vehicles are the only giveaway that this is a command and control post, small but nonetheless important. The ground is littered with shrapnel but there are no bomblets or mines evident nearby. Even so, I

restrict the extent to which Pete and Steve can move about and retrace my footsteps in the dozen paces between our vehicles.

In the back of our vehicle I draw a replica of the large chart in Magee's Bradley, showing the entire crossing area and the all-important lanes. We pin it on the board along with a larger map of the area and a running list of various codes and radio call signs. Magee and I spend an hour discussing the sequence of the upcoming phase, especially the timing to release the anxious British units from their holding area down south. I am satisfied we have a workable plan. We continue to monitor the battle up front, although almost all the fighting in the immediate area has now ceased and 1st Brigade is firmly in preparation mode for the passage of lines. This is a major task with more than 2,000 vehicles squeezing through the breach area before the British 1st Armoured Division can begin its breakout to the east. The central task for the British is to destroy the Iraqi reserves of tanks and other combat units being held in a second line of defence. This will protect the right flank of the vast American force, which is to deliver a sweeping 'left hook' to the Iraqi forces in southeastern Iraq, cutting off the most dangerous Iraqi armoured forces and setting the conditions for their destruction in an area straddling northern Kuwait and the Iraqi city of Basra.

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That is the big plan but there are dozens of subordinate tasks to be accomplished to make this happen.

The carefully laid schedule has been thrown out of kilter by the speed of the attacks so far. As a consequence, the plan to truck the British heavy armour to the staging point, to reduce mechanical failures on the 50-kilometre drive, has been shelved. The tanks and armoured vehicles have

been driven to their staging area with only a few breakdowns. Dan Magee and I are aware the British are beginning to move, but they have not yet been given the order to commence through the breach area.

Our focus is getting the lanes expanded and marked. This is accomplished with large red-and-white signs at the entrance to each lane showing an appropriate letter: ‘C’ for Lane Charlie through to ‘G’ for the last of our lanes, Lane Golf. In many cases there are still huge bomb craters in the lanes that need to be partly filled. Mines litter the shoulders of the lanes where they have been pushed aside by the mine ploughs without detonating, and these need to be marked. There is no scope to defuse or blow them up. Long ribbons of red-and-white mine marking tape festoon the sides of each lane—scant protection for anyone straying out of the lane but the best that can be done in the time available. Another large sign, prepared some days earlier, is also carefully erected at the entrance to the breach area: it declares ‘Welcome to Iraq, Courtesy of the Big Red One!’, a reference to the large red number 1 that soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division wear as a shoulder patch.

Ahead of us lies a busy afternoon. In the ensuing hours we will help coordinate the passage of an entire armoured division through the breach area and onwards to the next fight.

5

A WALK IN A MINEFIELD

Just before midday, the US commanders decide it's time for the British to advance and I make the long-anticipated call. 'You are cleared to commence the move to Phase Line New Jersey,' I say, referring to the 16-kilometre-wide arc on our maps that marks the outer extremity of the area secured by the US forces. This point is also the Line of Departure for the subsequent British breakout to the east. The acknowledgement is brusque but I know the British radios will be humming with traffic in seconds. I glance at my watch to record the time in my log: it is 1200 hours precisely.

Magee and I have calculated it will take the Brits about two hours to begin to enter the first of the lanes spread out across the desert around us. But less than an hour later I am stunned to hear Pete call me urgently from outside our vehicle. 'Boss! Boss! Quick! The lads have arrived already! They're entering the lanes right now!' he yells.

I rush outside and look across at a steady stream of tanks pouring into the lanes at high speed. 'Shit!' I shout, turning to run across to Dan Magee who has heard the commotion and is already striding towards us.

'The fuckers are early!' he says as he approaches, surprised but not too fazed. 'They must have snuck up the routes—there's no way they could've covered those miles that quick.' He smiles wryly. 'I'll tell Colonel Maggart, but there's no stopping them now.' Magee pivots and strolls back to his vehicle.

And so it begins, ahead of schedule. ‘Well, boys,’ I tell Steve and Pete, ‘it looks as though our guys are keen to get amongst it.’ I stand for a moment watching the tan tide of armoured vehicles sweep through the lane entrance. ‘Go get ’em, lads!’ I shout into the wind.

From the rise where our camouflaged wagons sit, I have a good view and can see the purposeful movement of vehicles. But it is not long before the flow slows then grinds to a halt in one of the lanes. Challenger tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, with a few lighter armoured machines, are banked up front-to-rear through the lane as far as I can see. Hundreds of vehicles are now stationary in the breach area. Some crewmen have decided to ignore the orders to remain inside their turrets during this vulnerable period and are standing in their hatches, gesturing towards vehicles to their front and rear. One vehicle is trying to turn around inside the lane but is now jammed. What the hell is going on? I jog back to my wagon and after several calls I am none the wiser.

Word of the tank jam has now reached the British headquarters, still to the rear. I stride over to Magee’s tent and find him firing questions into a radio. He spots me and raises a hand to hold me there until he finishes his conversation. ‘John, the Brits might have hit some mines, or something, beyond the other end of the nearest lane, Delta–Echo. They’re stuck and the whole thing is going to turn to shit unless we sort it out. I need you to get down there and take charge. Use my Humvee; the driver is in the vehicle.’

After informing my men and arranging for them to send a SITREP to our headquarters, I run to the Humvee and quickly brief the American driver, a sergeant, telling him to find his own way down off the rise and into the congested lane. He crunches through the gears as we reverse from between the camouflage nets and roar off down the slope, angling away from the lane’s mouth so as to enter it from further back, behind where the mines are. Smart move. We are soon bumping along the edge of the lane,

past the idling tanks with exhaust fumes washing over us. There is just enough room and I watch with alarm at how close we sometimes come to riding up the sand bank, laced with mines, that marks the boundary. ‘Keep away from the edge, Sergeant,’ I tell the driver, who merely grunts.

After a time we reach the far end of the lane and are stopped by the congestion. There is no longer any room for us to drive alongside the column. ‘Sir, we’re going nowhere,’ says my driver.

‘Yeah, I can see that,’ I say. ‘You stay here. Tell Colonel Magee that I’m going forward on foot. Wait for me to come back but if the column starts to move you go with it until you find me. Don’t forget. I need you to pick me up at some stage.’

‘Got it, sir,’ he says, reaching for the radio.

I soon wonder if this is a good idea. I am able to walk close beside the halted vehicles for a while, alongside the long mound of ploughed sand and its upturned mines. At times the tanks fill the scarified strip completely and I am forced to climb onto the rear of them, walking along the bins above the tracks, past the turret to the surprised glances of the occasional crew commander peering from his hatch. I then jump back down into the tracks of the vehicle ahead and repeat the process. I am puffing more with each climb. One of the crew commanders gives me a mouthful of abuse as I climb onto his tank. ‘Who the fuck are you, mate?’ he bellows. ‘Get off my fuckin’ tank!’

‘I’m the liaison officer for Major General Smith,’ I shout. ‘Major Cantwell. I need to get forward and I’m fucked if I’m going to get my legs blown off just to avoid climbing on your tank, *mate*!’ I add, noticing his rank: corporal.

He looks at me briefly then waves towards the front. ‘Fill your boots, sir,’ he says, and I am dismissed.

Eventually I reach the front of the queue. Just two vehicles remain ahead of me. I am talking to an officer, the troop commander of this group of tanks. I see the problem immediately. There is a minefield ahead and around us. On either flank the tops of tan-coloured mines are clearly visible, exposed by the weather. Some are the large, flat dish shape of anti-tank mines; others are a mix of small, round tin can–shaped anti-personnel mines and the deadly jumping jacks—designed to pop out of the ground and explode at waist height—with their distinctive three prongs protruding through the sand. Adding to the lethal cocktail are our own unexploded bomblets. Men are standing on the tanks near us, looking over the side. ‘The bloody things are everywhere!’ says the young officer. ‘We can’t go through and we can’t back up. My squadron leader is threatening to cut my nuts off. What a balls-up.’

I pull out my notebook. ‘Give me a grid,’ I order. ‘While you’re at it, give me the estimated location of the southern edge of the minefield and where you think there are bomblets but no mines.’

This accomplished, I record the details then stop to think. There is no way these guys can just drive through this stuff; even if they can spot most of the mines there’ll be others unexposed by the wind and rain and someone will get nailed. I look down at the sand beside the tank. There doesn’t seem to be a pattern to the mines I can see and there is no fence marking the southern edge. It’s an unmarked, scattered minefield. Some dullard Iraqi commander has randomly seeded mines here. And our bloody artillery hasn’t helped by adding a dusting of bomblets.

‘Righto, here’s what’s going to happen,’ I eventually say to the tank commander. ‘You guys are going to have to stay put for a bit. I’m going to walk back down the column until I think it’s safe for vehicles to turn off the line. I’m going to redirect the column across to the next lane, which is Lane Golf.’

‘Right,’ the young officer answers, looking far from convinced.

‘Once I’ve got some of the vehicles back there moving across towards the next lane, you can back up and then follow when you reach the turn-off,’ I tell him.

He looks rearwards, still unconvinced. ‘Got it?’ I ask, more forcefully. ‘This isn’t in the plan but we need to get it sorted. Do you understand what I need you to do?’

He nods.

‘Good, now get on the radio and tell the others. I don’t want to have to tell every crew commander between here and Saudi Arabia what I just told you.’ I clamber to the back of the tank, stepping across and down onto the glacis plate on the front of the next tank close behind, and continue this way for about a hundred metres before I see that the sand is mostly clear of mines. There are still a few bomblets lying about but these are clearly visible and hopefully avoidable.

I ask where the nearest officer is and am directed to the next tank back. ‘Yes?’ queries the fellow as I climb up next to him. ‘What do you want us to do?’ He’s got the message.

‘I’m going to guide you on foot for a bit, to make sure we get the new route started properly. Follow me closely. Once I think we are going okay I’ll climb back on board and we’ll finish the route across to Lane Golf. I only want the vehicles that have come beyond the end of this lane to follow, understand? Once I’ve got you out of the way I’ll turn the rest of the conga line around and backtrack them down the lane. It’s wide enough inside the lane but not here. Once we get to the other end of the lane I’ll then redirect them across to Lane Golf too.’

He looks at me and says, with apparent sincerity, ‘Good luck.’

‘Thanks,’ I say and climb down onto the sand beside the vehicle. I look around, thankful for daylight, scanning for any telltale signs of mines. I see

none in my immediate vicinity and so scan a little wider out.

There's one. Shit. Okay, it looks clear over there. I walk a couple of timid steps in that direction, holding my breath. My heart is thumping in my chest. Not good, I think, not good at all. I look back up at the tank behind me, where the commander stares down at me, stony-faced. Keep it going, I think. Scan. Scan again. Step. Step. Scan. Step. And so on. I am walking along the edge of an unmarked, scattered minefield, probably laid by ignorant conscripts who only partly followed orders. What could possibly go wrong here? I muse. Everything! Focus. *Focus*.

Scan, scan, step. Scan, scan, step. Keep it going. Scan, scan, step. Remember to breathe. Scan, scan, step. Breathe.

There appears to be clear sand ahead. If I direct the tanks slightly further to the right they should be okay. I turn around and wave towards the tank I have left behind, now 50 metres away. 'This way!' I shout, gesturing towards myself, certain my voice cannot carry, but it is enough to prompt the commander peering back at me. The tank lurches into motion, pivoting around by driving one track forward and one track back.

I watch the steel behemoth roll slowly towards me. It occurs to me that here is not a good place to be if the tank hits a mine. I should lie flat, but compromise by crouching to lower my profile. I watch for the flash of an erupting mine. Nothing happens, and eventually I breathe again.

Now the tank is close enough for me to climb back up on board. 'Keep going!' I shout at the crewmen. 'That way!' pointing slightly right of our current track. 'Watch the ground! It looks okay but you never know!'

The operator has also emerged from his hatch, and he rolls his eyes. 'Fuckin' great!' he says, then ducks back inside.

I scramble up to lie between the top hatches. 'Let's go!' I bellow and stretch out as flat as possible. We start moving. I can see that the commander is directing the driver but I hear nothing except the roar of the

engine and the wind in my ears as we roll forwards. As we near the next lane I can see it is clear of traffic, the first group of tanks and other armoured vehicles have already passed through, heading north. ‘There!’ I shout, pointing to a likely area to cross the low mound of sand bordering the lane. ‘Cross there!’ I repeat, pointing again. The tank shifts direction with a lurch, and we edge towards it. I crane up slightly to stare intensely at the spot as we get closer. I can’t see any mines or bomblets. ‘Keep rolling!’ I shout.

With only a slight lurch to show that we have crossed the ridge of sand, we are through and turning to point north in the lane.

‘Brilliant!’ says the officer. ‘Well done!’

‘All part of the service,’ I reply, smiling as much to reassure myself as him. In truth, I am still shaking in my boots. ‘Call the rest of them to follow, but let me get back to the other lane first.’

‘Right you are!’ he says, and we shake hands before I step across the turret, down onto the damp engine deck, and then over the back end to drop into one of the tracks.

My return to the rest of the tanks is the signal to move, and nearby several tanks start their engines, then a steady stream of them begins to move carefully along the tracks we have just laid. The tank I had ridden on is already driving northwards. With the tanks beyond the end of the lane safely on their way across to Lane Golf, I turn the rest of the column back on itself, like a snake sliding back towards its own tail. I sort out a few more problems, redirecting the tanks caught at the head of the initial traffic jam, then hitch a ride back down Lane Delta–Echo on the top of a tank.

The looks I get from some of the tank commanders still waiting in the lane are priceless. Where the *hell* are you going? their faces say. Along the way I spot my temporary driver sitting in his Humvee. He looks equally

puzzled. I give him the turnaround signal, twirling my finger in the air. He just nods, waiting to turn to join the procession back through the lane.

Finally we emerge from the mouth of the lane. We are clear of the minefields and I jump down and direct the column across to Lane Golf. I stand on the side of the lane as the armoured vehicles roll by. I receive a few waves of thanks.

Eventually, my Humvee driver pulls up alongside and I climb inside, suddenly very weary. ‘Pass me the handset, will you?’ I say, reaching across the top of the radio set. I call Magee and tell him I’ve fixed the problem, that I’ve redirected traffic into Lane Golf, and that I’ll give him a full report as soon as I get back there. He replies with a relaxed ‘Roger’ and signs off.

Relaxed is hardly the term to describe the reaction I get from my British counterparts when I call them with the news after rejoining Steve and Pete back at our vehicle. What I get is an earful of abuse, a lecture about how much work went into developing the movement plan through the breach, and what a dickhead I am for changing the plan without approval. I fume for a moment, then snap back. ‘When I looked around in the damn minefield I didn’t see anyone, especially you, who could have given me approval. The problem is solved. Get over it. You’ve got tanks moving towards their Line of Departure that would otherwise still be stuck in the breach. Understand?’

I give the coordinates of the minefield. I congratulate myself on not saying fuck, or worse, once during my transmission. The conversation is over without thanks or congratulations. I toss the handset into the rack beside the radio in the back of our wagon in disgust. ‘Wankers!’ I look down at my legs and feet, thankfully still attached. This is the second time in twenty-four hours that I have been walking among mines and unexploded bomblets. That’s a bad habit, I tell myself.

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By mid-afternoon—1515 hours, to be precise—all of the British 7th Armoured Brigade is through the lanes and firm on Phase Line New Jersey. They immediately break out to the east. A few hours later, at 1930 hours, their sister formation, the 4th Armoured Brigade, is likewise through the breach and ready to commence its own advance eastwards. All of them, except for some logistic groups temporarily held behind the breach to facilitate the relocation of US combat elements, are advancing and clear of their Lines of Departure on Phase Line New Jersey by 2140 hours. We have done our job. I lean back against the radios inside our wagon with a huge sigh. I still have several hours of work ahead of me before I can sleep, but the main task of the day is complete.

I’ve done my part assisting two and a half thousand vehicles through minefields, bomb craters and buried Iraqis. I’ve survived another day. The next phase of the war, the British advance to destroy an Iraqi armoured division, awaits.

6

OPERATION SCORPION

As the sun sets on the desert, the first of the British combat units comes into contact with the Iraqis. The Scots Dragoon Guards, a battle group comprising more than forty Challenger tanks and a mechanised infantry company, encounters an Iraqi position known as Copper North. Initially thought to be a communications site, it turns out to be an Iraqi headquarters and is heavily defended. I follow the action over the radio. Poor visibility due to rain and sandstorms means the British tanks are forced to move within only a few hundred metres of the enemy before an intense battle breaks out.

A junior tank commander, Second Lieutenant Richard Telfer, leads the battle group, drawing the bulk of the Iraqi fire for three-quarters of an hour while he directs the supporting infantry company. The infantry company, part of a battalion known as the Staffords, is commanded by Major Simon Knapper. I had become friends with Knapper in the months leading up to the assault—he'd loaned me his body armour so I could do some work near the Iraqi border. Now I listen as he faces a stiff fight, with grenades and rifle fire, to clear the enemy trenches. His men find themselves drenched by pouring rain on a pitch-black night with only burning Iraqi tanks as visible points of reference. In this eerie scene, the Iraqis fight hard, wounding several British infantrymen. As our soldiers are being patched up on the battlefield, other Iraqi tanks attack. Our Challenger tanks respond, destroying every one of them in a flurry of disciplined and brutal fire. My

friend Simon Knapper and the young officer, Richard Telfer, will win the Military Cross for their actions.

Reports also come in that British tank crews have surprised a large group of Iraqi tanks and armoured personnel carriers attempting to form up for battle. They immediately attack, destroying a string of Iraqi vehicles.

During the night there is confusion about an area thought to contain a hospital. The attacking Scots Dragoon Guards hold their fire and wait for an American Psychological Operations team with its loudspeakers. In the end, a few demonstration shots from the tanks and calls over the loudspeakers in Arabic do the trick and the Iraqis surrender. Far from being a hospital, the installation turns out to be a logistic site and a large headquarters. This restraint is typical of the British attitude to their enemies. I will witness it on several occasions in the coming days.

As I listen in to the fight, perched on the bench of our wagon kilometres away, I am itching to join them. Eventually, though, I must sleep. As midnight approaches one of the boys relieves me at the radio and I stumble outside, giddy with fatigue, and into my sleeping bag on a low stretcher beside our vehicle.

But the sleep is mercilessly brief. ‘What time is it?’ I ask as one of Colonel Magee’s men prods me awake.

‘It’s just past 0130, sir.’ The officer tells me the US 1st Brigade, indeed the entire US 1st Infantry Division, is going to advance north from the breach area to join the rest of the huge force already swinging into line for the decisive attack to destroy the Iraqi Army.

‘What’s the concept of the movement?’ I ask as I haul myself out of my sleeping bag. He explains a complicated scheme of manoeuvre involving several brigades. It is pelting with rain and pitch black, and the move of the American division will be conducted through an area still infested with mines and bomblets. This could turn into an almighty mess.

The officer leaves and I poke my head into our vehicle. ‘Okay fellas, listen up,’ I say. Pete is already awake, listening to the radios, but Steve is sound asleep. He groans then props himself up on one elbow, still in his sleeping bag. It is comparatively warm in the wagon but there is only room for two men to sleep. Because this is their vehicle, I always let them sleep inside. Provided it’s safe, I prefer to sleep outside anyway, up against the left-hand track.

I tell them the basics. ‘Pass me the handset, Pete, and flick me onto the frequency for our headquarters.’

‘Already there, boss,’ he replies, passing the handset over.

I get on to the duty officer, now many kilometres off to the northeast. I ask what Major General Smith wants me to do. I am told to wait while an answer is sought.

‘You should rejoin this headquarters as soon as the Americans move,’ I’m ordered. I think about this briefly, pondering getting caught up in the movement of hundreds of US vehicles, in the dark, in a rainstorm, in the main Iraqi defence zone. The thought is deeply unattractive.

‘Roger,’ I reply, ‘but I suggest moving at first light, rather than a solo night activity through the middle of our American friends.’ There is another pause, presumably while someone talks to a more senior officer.

A first-light move is eventually approved and then I’m given the grid reference of the headquarters’ location. Pete scribbles it down. ‘You can expect another liaison task once you get here.’ I acknowledge my orders and sign off.

When reports come in of more action by our British comrades, I crane in to listen on the radio. The other formation making up the British division’s combat power, the 4th Armoured Brigade, is in the thick of it. Tasked with clearing a large enemy position called Bronze, the brigade’s tanks and infantry find themselves in a confusing battle with Iraqi infantry

who alternatively fight then seem to want to surrender, only to start fighting again.

One of the British company commanders, Major John Potter of the Royal Scots, deliberately turns on the headlights of his Warrior infantry fighting vehicle just 100 metres from the forward Iraqi trench to show himself as someone the Iraqis can come to. Eventually a large number of Iraqis begin to surrender, walking towards the lights—encouraged by a few grenades and bursts of machine-gun fire into some of the trenches. John Potter will also win the Military Cross for his courage.

This British restraint pays off. We hear reports that another attacking force elsewhere holds its fire despite clearance to attack a group of forty to fifty vehicles near an Iraqi infantry position. The large group of vehicles turns out to be a British medical unit that has gotten lost—the same unit that had almost wrecked our rehearsal for the breach operation. I shudder at how close to disaster they have come.

I want to follow every move but can’t fight the need for sleep. I get out of the vehicle and wriggle into my sleeping bag, fighting to get my boots down inside. I pull up the waterproof outer shell to ward off the drips coming through the canvas awning and fall into a troubled sleep.

A couple of hours later I’m startled awake by an icy splash of water on my face. ‘What the fuck?’ There is no reply. More water lands on my head before I realise the tent is blowing away in a howling wet gale. I struggle out of the bag to find the Americans leaving. Soldiers wielding red torches are pulling down their camouflage netting and in the process they’ve pulled out a couple of our pegs and the annexe is now in danger of blowing away entirely. ‘Jesus, guys, steady on!’ I shout. ‘You’re wrecking our annexe!’ One of my crewmen emerges and between us we find and then re-hammer the pegs and tighten the ropes. It’s 4 a.m.

In the middle of this wet and windy confusion, Dan Magee and I bid a brief farewell. He has been unable to raise his boss on the radio and has decided to take his small command post and drive to his superior's headquarters. He tells me the start time for 1st Infantry Division's move has slipped back by an hour to 0600 hours due to the storm, a good decision in my view. We exchange a few more words then part with a handshake. I will never see him again. He makes it through the war but will die a few years later after falling from a horse.

Magee and his small caravan of vehicles disappear into the night, leaving us alone, wet and wind-battered on our sandy rise. My sleeping bag is wet but I struggle into it, set my alarm and fall into a deep sleep. The alarm wakes me an hour later. It is still dark, still pissing down and still cold. The three of us communicate with grunts and curses as we kick poles and pegs and stow away the annexe and awning. I long for a hot drink but we've wasted time packing the wet gear and so, with a wan light creeping across the desert, we mount the vehicle and check our intercom system. I munch on a couple of crackers that Steve passes me, swigging from my water bottle to wash them down. I hear him call our headquarters to tell them we are moving. Our destination is 50 kilometres away.

I hear the crackle of numerous reports outlining more fighting by our brigades. Two battle groups of 7th Armoured Brigade are bypassing the fight on Objective Copper North, dashing to another area known as Objective Zinc. Zinc is thought to contain an Iraqi brigade of several thousand troops, and the attacking force is probably outnumbered. The commander of the 7th Brigade, Brigadier Patrick Cordingley, unleashes a massive bombardment of heavy artillery and rockets, pounding the Iraqis for thirty minutes before unleashing his tank and infantry battle groups. They find a shell-shocked and disorganised Iraqi force, which quickly surrenders.

Soon after, however, a large Iraqi tank force counter-attacks. This battle lasts an hour and a half, during which the controlled fire of the British tanks inflicts a heavy toll on the advancing Iraqis. It is the second armoured counter-attack in a few hours, and hearing this we are all on edge as we drive eastwards. This is not the rapid surrender we have become used to in the last twenty-four hours. A third tank counter-attack follows a short time later, and this is also repulsed. At the same time, a lightly armoured group of reconnaissance troops finds itself in a battle with Iraqi tanks. They destroy twelve enemy tanks with Milan anti-tank missiles as the Iraqis emerge from their dugouts.

With these reports crackling in our ears, we thread our way through the breach area in the dawn, sticking closely to the tracks of other vehicles when we can. The responsibility for this dangerous drive weighs heavily on me; we are very isolated now, there is a lot of other movement, people are ready to shoot, the weather is appalling and there is a lot of room for cock-ups. The GPS navigation system is working fitfully, often dropping its satellite fix, and I'm trying to navigate by a mix of intermittent GPS information and the poor quality map I have folded in a plastic case on my lap. Tank tracks run everywhere, and wrecked Iraqi fortifications and vehicles are scattered about us. We see vast numbers of American vehicles heading north, preparing for their advance to strike the death blow that this grand scheme requires. With squalls of rain pelting Pete and me in our hatch, we slowly make our way to the east, leaving the stream of US armour behind us, eventually finding ourselves alone in an alien landscape.

The scene is one of mist-shrouded, sandy isolation. A few tank tracks occasionally cross under us, but for the most part we seem to be travelling through uncharted territory. Once we see a large rocket bombardment being fired, far off to the flank, and a pair of A-10 ground attack aircraft whistle low overhead, but otherwise we are alone. From time to time we encounter

a destroyed Iraqi tank or armoured personnel carrier, still smouldering despite the rain.

I worry about our direction. Am I taking us the right way? What if we run into Iraqis who want to fight? The GPS is still dropping out constantly. I dig out my plastic compass, the kind used in orienteering, and stand as high as I can in my hatch, holding the compass at full arm's stretch upwards to try to get it as far as possible from the metal of the vehicle. Looking up through the transparent body of the device to read the direction of the swinging compass needle, I keep bearing northeast then east.

Time after time we encounter mines or scattered bomblets. The first time this happens, we drive a hundred metres into one such deadly patch before I realise it. After reversing out on our own tracks, we sweep around the field of explosives, hoping the GPS will come back up and provide a corrected course. Slowly, with numerous diversions, we make progress.

The rain eases and I suddenly feel light-headed with fatigue. 'Stop the wagon, Pete,' I order. 'Just pull up here.'

We slow to a halt, Pete looking at me quizzically. 'We're going to take a short break, fellas,' I tell my crew. 'I'm shagged. I'm sure you are too, and we're making reasonable progress. Make a brew, check the vehicle, and let's make sure the gear is properly stowed. Our blokes are in the thick of it and we might have to launch again as soon as we arrive at HQ. I want to be ready.' And, apart from all that, I need to answer the call of nature.

The gas bottle is unpacked and is soon hissing under a pot of water. The load is secured more carefully, the running gear of the wagon gets a once-over from Pete, while Steve grabs a rifle and mounts a security picket near the vehicle, scanning the horizon for unexpected visitors. Walking a few paces away from the vehicle, I dig a shallow hole with a shovel, drop my webbing and helmet on the sand and begin the process of undoing my anti-chemical oversuit, hitching up my jacket, undoing the knotted cotton

braces, then pulling down the outer trousers and my uniform pants. This completed, I balance precariously forward on my toes to avoid falling backwards. I try to put the soiled sheets of toilet paper into the hole but they are whipped away by the wind. I let them go—a few sheets of shitty paper aren't going to reduce the real estate values around here, I figure. Finally I'm done and fumble with my clothing for some time until I am once again wrapped in multiple layers. I shovel sand over my mess, don my helmet then grab my webbing, swinging it into place on my shoulders with practised ease.

As I look down to fasten the webbed belt, I am terrified to see an enormous—*enormous*—glossy black scorpion emerge from my webbing. It scuttles rapidly towards my face.

'Fuck! Scorpion!' I shout, batting it away with frantic backhanded swipes. The beast falls onto the flat wet sand, instantly regains its feet, then charges back towards me. I dance backwards, thankful I have filled the hole. The scorpion advances, clearly angry now, tail twitching above its back, claws snapping.

It dawns on me that I could die as a result of a scorpion bite in the middle of a war—how embarrassing. Without further thought I pull out my pistol, racking back the slide to chamber a round, feeling sand grinding as the parts click-clack. I aim and shoot in one fluid move—and miss. The bullet digs a neat hole several inches from the scorpion. 'Shit!' I fire again, this time missing by even more. 'Fuck!' I fire again, and by now the scorpion is in full attack mode. I scamper off to the side, catching a glimpse of a very worried Steve dashing towards me from the other side of the vehicle. I shoot again, and miss again. 'I'll get you, you bastard!' I shout.

Pete jumps from the rear of the wagon as the scorpion becomes aware there are other targets nearby. It makes a dash towards the two lads and

without thinking I follow it with the barrel of my pistol, snapping off several quick rounds which kick up sand, close to one of Steve's boots.

'What the fuck, boss!' *Bang* goes my pistol again. I have failed to hit the scorpion with at least half a dozen shots. I take a two-handed grip and am lining up for another shot when Pete grabs the shovel, placing one hand on my arm while saying urgently, 'Get back, sir!' He brings down the shovel in a beautifully timed swing to crush my attacker. The combined sounds of the shovel blade slapping the damp sand and the crunch of disintegrating scorpion hold us transfixed for a few moments.

Finally Pete says, deadpan: 'Bloody officers.'

There is another short pause and then we all burst into laughter. Great whooping shouts of it, like over-excited schoolboys. I laugh so hard I think I might shit again. The boys are imitating my pistol skills, waving pointed fingers about wildly and shouting 'Scorpion! Scorpion!' which brings on more fits of laughter. I clear my pistol and make it safe, plugging it back into its holster. We wipe the tears from our eyes, and get on with making a brew. Between the hot, sweet tea and bursts of laughter, I feel rejuvenated. We pack up, I take another compass bearing and we head off.

7

REJOINING THE BRITISH

We find the headquarters of the British 1st Armoured Division late in the morning on 26 February. It is a Tuesday but such details are irrelevant in war, where each day is merely a period of time in which things must be done, kilometres must be covered, and Iraqi positions destroyed. It is also a day when ten British soldiers will die.

The division headquarters squats on the desert under its huge domed camouflage net, girded by a bulldozed wall of sand to provide protection from incoming fire. Gathered around are a dozen smaller clusters, satellites to the main command and control centre. It has taken us almost six hours to cover 80 kilometres. The layout is familiar and we have no difficulty locating one of the communications installations, where Steve hopes to get replacement parts for a partly malfunctioning radio. I tell the boys to see to the spares and to get a meal and some rest. I head towards the main headquarters enclosure.

The inside is as familiar to me as the exterior. I spent many days here before the ground war, assisting in the planning for the battles now underway. Well, either in this headquarters or its duplicate. The British have two headquarters, identical in every detail down to the maps, radios and chairs. If one headquarters is attacked, they’ve got another. The duplication also provides a means of leapfrogging to keep pace with the combat troops. It’s a process known as ‘stepping-up’.

As I walk past the armed sentry at the door, I spot the one distinguishing feature that marks this as the ‘main’ headquarters—the funnelled urinal tubes shoved into the sand outside the entrance are a different colour from those of the clone. Whether this tiny difference was deliberate or planned, it helps the commander and staff officers who transit between the two know which headquarters they are in.

To my surprise, the first person I meet when I enter the brightly lit interior is the division commander himself, Major General Rupert Smith. He sits in a folding chair at the head of the huge map-covered table that dominates the space. He looks up from some papers.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘It’s our traffic policeman,’ referring to my unauthorised diversion through the minefield lanes. I brace myself for a bollocking, preparing my defence. I needn’t have bothered. ‘Redirecting the vehicles in the breach was the right decision, John,’ he says. ‘Well done.’

I am flushed with relief that my actions have his approval, especially after the earlier dressing-down I’d received from an officious staff officer. I return the commander’s smile and shake his hand. Over his shoulder I see the relevant officer’s face darken with a scowl.

‘Get yourself back up to speed, John,’ says General Smith, ‘then go and see the chief of staff in an hour or two. I have another job for you.’

I spend the next hour circulating around the dozen armoured vehicles of the HQ. Officers are hard at work in each while radio operators intercept a constant stream of incoming messages and reports. Officers brief me on the progress of the battle, but having monitored the radio, I find I am up to date. Still, it is helpful to see the maps and hear the officers’ explanations.

I listen as the 4th Armoured Brigade launches a strike on Objective Brass, located on the southern edge of our boundary. Objective Brass presents a challenge. It covers about 120 square kilometres and is thought to contain an Iraqi brigade, potentially made up of a thousand or more troops

and dozens of tanks. Our Challenger tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles are advancing right on the edge of, and sometimes even through, supporting artillery fire. British infantry pile from their vehicles right on top of the dazed Iraqi defenders, still deafened in their trenches from the bombardment. It is wonderfully well controlled and I feel thrilled to be part of it, even at this distance.

I am tired but uplifted by the progress and buoyed to see some of my friends. I leave in search of Pete and Steve, telling them to expect to be moving again in a couple of hours. Steve has had a frustrating time locating the parts, but vows he'll get them before we leave. We eat a ration-pack meal, our first proper feed in more than a day. Then I use some of our brew water to shave and wash the grime from my face. Anticipating another sleepless night ahead, I pull out my sleeping bag and stretch out next to our wagon.

When I am shaken awake, I can't open my eyes. A sandstorm had sprung up and they are stuck together by dried sand, which also blocks my nose, fills my ears and is making inroads into my sleeping bag. I scrape and rub the sand away, cursing, feeling dirtier than before my wash only an hour before. I shake out my sleeping bag and repack my gear, and return to the headquarters to get my assignment.

Just as I arrive, news of a tragedy unfolds. In the closing stages of the assault on Objective Brass, Warrior vehicles carrying infantry of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers have come under attack, two of them exploding in deadly fireballs. There is confusion. How has this happened? Did they miss an Iraqi tank? Did they hit mines? In the midst of the mayhem, soldiers dash to the aid of their comrades. There are acts of great bravery as men, including some wounded in the initial blast, struggle to rescue soldiers trapped in burning vehicles. Despite heroic attempts, this proves futile. Of the twenty casualties, nine are dead.

At the headquarters there is shock, then dismay as it becomes clear the incident is the result of friendly fire. Two American A-10 aircraft have mistaken the area for one still occupied by Iraqis. They have fired deadly Maverick missiles. British units had sent a message to say they were holding the area, but somehow it became confused.

The earlier sense of satisfaction I felt instantly dissolves and a palpable sense of sadness envelops the headquarters. There is further disturbing news that the dead will be temporarily left in their vehicles while the advance continues. It is then that I receive my orders for the next task.

The commander is now absent and so I report to his chief of staff, Colonel John Reith. Reith, like the commander, is an energetic and forceful officer of the famed Parachute Regiment. He beckons me into the back of his vehicle, where we sit either side of the map that's pinned to the wall.

'John,' he begins, 'the general has another job for you liaising with the Americans.' I feel a brief twinge of regret that I will not join the British units fighting to our east, but quell this in order to concentrate. He explains how various American forces, in a coordinated attack with the Brits, will sweep through Iraq and into Kuwait, destroying the Iraqi Army as they go. My job is to ensure that we keep pace with the closest American division.

'If either of us gets too far ahead or behind each other we'll open up a gap between the two divisions that the Iraqis could exploit. Understand?' he asks, turning to look at me.

'I understand, sir.' The damage that even a modestly sized Iraqi force could do if it got in among the artillery and logistic elements is obvious.

'So, we need you to make sure that doesn't happen. Get yourself up here,' he says, pointing to a small cross on the boundary between us and the US 1st Infantry Division, the nearest flanking formation, 'and establish communications with the Americans. They are going to send someone there as well, so you need to get going.'

The US 1st Infantry Division, I think. The same guys I just worked with in the breach area. I notice the coordination point is some distance to the northeast, around 50 kilometres away, almost ahead of the leading troops. The Americans don't seem to have advanced that far yet, based on the markings on the colonel's map. I point to these now.

'Are these positions for the Americans up to date, Colonel?' I ask.

He nods. 'As far as we know. You might need to let them know by radio that you've arrived, so they don't mistake you for Iraqis.'

'Quite,' I say, adopting the understated style of my British colleagues. I ponder inadvertently finding myself in the path of the immense combat power I'd witnessed coming through the breach over the last two days. 'Any idea how long I'll need to stay there, sir?'

'Not at the moment. That depends on progress, but at least several hours. We may need you to move along to the east to establish other coordination points later on, to make sure we keep out of each other's way.'

There are about three hours of light left. I need to get moving. At this rate we'll be occupying the coordination point in the dark. I tuck my notebook into a pocket. 'Is there anything else, sir?'

'You fellows will be on your own up there,' Reith says, looking directly at me. 'Just try to keep out of harm's way, John.'

'That's the plan, sir,' I say, shaking hands. I speak briefly to a couple of friends, get a few 'take care' farewells, then I'm off.

The boys are ready to go. Steve has 'liberated' the necessary spares from somewhere; I'm advised not to ask too many questions. I don't. I figure we'll need working radios where we're heading. I quickly brief them on the mission. They ask few questions but I can tell the idea of launching a solo mission into the uncertain area between two attacking divisions doesn't fill them with excitement.

I look at them both, trying to reassure them. I tell them the Americans know we are coming and that we can call in help from our boys, who are off to the south, but it does little to ease their fears.

I’m nervous too but try to hide this from my crewmen. I don’t feel the same sense of excitement that accompanied my other missions. A long drive into danger is in front of us.

8

INTO THE VOID

With our headquarters dropping out of sight, we first head north to avoid the area where our troops will be attacking the next objective. We intercept lots of tank tracks running east–west across our front, which must be those of 7th Armoured Brigade, and initially I hold our course northwards to ensure we don't get tangled up. Occasionally, we hear the muted sounds of firing away to our right. The rain is holding off although it remains overcast with a brisk wind pulling sand, creating mist-like gritty veils up to the height of our vehicle. These shift and part at times so that I can see a kilometre or more ahead. At other times they swirl around us, cutting visibility to a few hundred metres.

After a time we stop seeing the tracks of other vehicles. I ask Pete how far we have come, a drill we have often used to help me navigate in this barren landscape. He ducks down into his hatch, then tells me we've come a bit over 10 miles. The vehicle's instruments are calibrated in miles and the maps are in kilometres, so I do a quick mental conversion. Looking at my map I decide it's safe to make the turn that will take us northeast towards the distant coordination point. I enter the data into the GPS, which takes a couple of minutes to lock onto enough satellites to obtain a fix. The small green-and-black screen displays the most basic of guidance symbols: a short graduated bar with an arrowhead to indicate the desired direction. I instruct Pete to come half right and watch the arrowhead settle near the

middle of the scale. The readout says we have 35 kilometres to go. We chug on, with a steady stream of dark exhaust fumes trailing us.

Sometime later the sand parts and I catch a glimpse of something dark on the desert floor ahead, off to the left. I am instantly on guard. We are in no-man's-land here, moving ever further from the areas cleared by our advancing forces. Reaching for my binoculars, I order Pete to slow down. I can make out a vehicle, perhaps a truck, but it looks out of shape. Pete stops so I can stabilise the binoculars but the haze makes identification difficult. I tell Pete to head slowly towards the shape, and reach for our GPMG, general purpose machine gun. A belt of gleaming brass bullets runs from the ammunition box into the heart of the weapon, ready to be fired. I take another look and see another shape, that of a man lying on the ground near the vehicle. It's now clear that what I've spotted is indeed a truck, and as we draw near it becomes obvious that it has been torn apart by an explosion.

'Steve,' I say, to put him on alert, 'a truck has been blown up ahead of us. It looks like there's a guy lying next to it. We're going to have a closer look.'

I get a 'Righto' in reply and instruct Pete to drive in closer. 'The GPMG is ready, mate,' I say. From the corner of my eye I see him nod.

As we roll closer I decide the truck is Iraqi, or was Iraqi. Now it is just another piece of wreckage lying in the desert. It has been struck by a high-explosive projectile, probably a missile fired from an aircraft. It must have burned for a while after the impact, because the cabin and frame are blackened and charred along with the sand around it. The buckled carcass of the truck has settled onto the sand as the tyres burned, already looking like it has begun to be absorbed into the desert.

There are several figures sprawled around the wreckage. As I stare at these, trying to be certain they no longer pose a threat, I am startled to see

what appears to be an arm lift briefly from one of the bodies. ‘Shit!’ I exclaim. ‘Did you see that? Something moved.’

‘Nope,’ Pete replies, but he slows then stops the vehicle. I scan the body through my binoculars but there is no further movement.

‘Okay, we need to check if there are any wounded here. Take us up to twenty metres.’

‘You reckon that’s a good idea, sir?’ warns Steve. ‘I mean, there could be unexploded ordnance, or anything.’ Pete is looking warily at me from his driver’s hatch.

‘I thought I saw some movement. We’ve got to check.’ I urge him closer. We jerk forward, rolling slowly and stop just short of the burnt truck. ‘Steve,’ I say over the intercom, ‘get up here and man the gun. You guys wait here.’ I remove my headphones then lift my feet clear of the hatch to climb down onto the sand. I walk towards the nearest crumpled figure, the one from which I saw, or thought I saw, some movement.

As I draw close, I see there is no chance of him being alive. The dead Iraqi lies face down, one arm flung outwards. His upper body has been flayed by the force of the explosion. His back is a mess, gouged open to reveal a glutinous interior mingled with the remains of his jacket. Dark blood has soaked into his clothing and has discoloured the sand next to his body. The back of his head has been battered into a pulpy black mass. He is missing a boot. As I stand above him a gust of wind kicks up some more sand around us and I jump slightly when part of his torn clothing flaps. This is what had caught my attention. There is nothing I can do for him.

Time is ticking by and I am conscious of the need to get moving. I look towards our vehicle and the pale faces of Steve and Pete peer back at me. I walk around the dead man to a figure near the rear of the truck. This man has been badly mutilated in the blast. Parts of both legs are missing; a ghastly white piece of shin bone protrudes from his torn trousers. Blood has

run from the shattered remains of his legs and into the sand. His ruptured trunk is strangely distorted, hunched and misaligned. He has been decapitated. Looking around through the mists of swirling sand, I see a dark lump about 10 metres away. With a sickening realisation, I know what it must be: this man's head. For a moment I stare at it, a rounded shape lying in the sand.

There is another form slumped further around the rear of the shattered truck. I walk towards it through the litter of the explosion. Twisted pieces of wood and metal lie about, some of the shreds blackened while others gleam in the weak light. Downwind of the corpse I have just left, I can smell the sweet stink that marks the early stages of decay. Death probably arrived here a couple of days ago, I figure, given the slight swelling of the bodies and the extinguished fire. Were they fleeing the advancing British, I wonder? Did they hear the aircraft that stalked them? Did they see the incoming missile? I shake these pointless thoughts aside.

The next body looks a lot like the last—torn, partly dismembered, pressing into the sand that has soaked up the last of his life blood. Like his fallen comrade lying nearby, he has been decapitated, although more crudely. Part of his shoulder is also gone, as is the arm. I look around but cannot see his head. Puffing air from my lungs, I look back at the truck, knowing that I must check inside the ruined cabin. I am on the side of the truck away from the boys. I can see them through the bent tubular frame over the bed of the truck that must have held a canvas tarpaulin. I sense their anxiety even from here.

Get on with it, you're wasting time! Stepping around the dead soldier at my feet, I walk to the front of the truck. The glass is all gone, flaked and crusted bits of burnt paint cling to the twisted metal that remains of the door and roof. The seat of the cabin is all naked springs and metal frame. The driver rests on one end of the wiry seat. He has been burnt to a crisp. His

blackened form is wedged against one of the doors, his clothing gone, shrunken by the flames that have consumed him and the interior of the cabin. I can smell him. The stink is greasy, acrid, but with the unmistakable whiff of cooked meat. Feeling slightly ill, I look away, and my eyes come to rest on another human head.

The head is lying on its side a little distance from the cabin. The wind has dropped for the moment and with it the swirling sands. I see the head clearly. The face is turned this way, one eye staring at me. I recoil, then steady myself. It is the head of the man I saw lying towards the back of the truck. ‘Sweet Jesus,’ I mutter, not sure if it’s a prayer or a curse. I step towards the head, transfixed by its glaring eye. Curiously, it is clean despite the blowing sand. Perhaps the rain has rinsed it.

The short curly hair is frosted by sand. The lips are swollen, the other eye lost in a puffy mush of darkened flesh. The meaty remnants of one shoulder are still attached, sufficient to hold a tattered scarf which is wrapped around the neck. The ends of the filthy rag whip in the wind, making small slapping sounds.

There is no-one alive here, no wounded that we might help—just dead men and a burnt-out truck.

I am struck by a strange sensation, an aversion to the human head being separated from the body. It is as though we are programmed to expect that the head should remain firmly in place. The prospect of severed limbs, unpleasant as it is, is somehow comprehensible, but not this.

I have seen thousands of bombs and missiles being fired, but this is the first time I’ve seen for myself what they do to people. The expanding cloud of incandescent gas at the heart of the explosion has plucked heads from men while rending their bodies and limbs. I realise we have no time to bury these men, no time to do more than record the map location of this insignificant tableau of death.

And then I realise there is something I can do, one small act that might partly dignify the fact that in a moment I will walk back to my vehicle and drive away. I reach down and grasp one end of the flapping scarf around the neck of the severed head at my feet, lifting the head and its grisly attachment from the sand. I am surprised by the weight of it. I carry it across to the body to which I am sure it belongs, holding my arm out to prevent it bumping against my leg. I place the head against the wreckage that is the upper torso. That's one.

I walk a little distance from the truck and its passengers, to where I saw the rounded shape a few minutes earlier. I hear the engine of our own vehicle rattle into life. 'Boss, come on!' yells one of my lads. I reach the second head. Mercifully, it does not gaze back at me but rests face down in the sand, neatly cleaved across the neck. There is no scarf, no scrap of clothing about it. Gingerly, I grasp a clump of hair between my thumb and forefinger, exhaling as though to expel the revulsion, and place the head next to the shoulders of the dead man. Then I rub my fingers in the damp sand, trying to scrub off the clammy sweat on my hand. I stand erect. That's two.

I've done all I can do for these men. I will record the grid location of this spot but there will be hundreds, thousands, of such places like this to be rediscovered, searched and cleansed. At least these ones will be mostly intact when the battlefield clean-up detail arrives, whenever that might be.

'Boss, come on! We need to leave!' I stride back to the vehicle, uncertain if Pete and Steve have seen what I did on the other side of the truck. I hope not. A few minutes later, we are gone, roaring away towards the grey horizon.

I'll not speak of this incident with anyone for more than twenty years, not even with Jane. But I will relive this little scene in many dreams to come.

We drive onwards, northeast, until we intercept a handful of vehicle tracks crossing our path, but see no-one. Exhaustion returns and once again I force myself to concentrate, to stay awake. Then, after perhaps half an hour, I am jolted alert by the sight of a group of several vehicles coming into view some distance ahead. For a moment I am confused, thinking that this could be the American coordination point but it's all wrong—according to the map and the GPS it is still more than 20 kilometres away. 'Okay, look alive boys,' I say. 'Vehicles ahead. Slow down, Pete.'

As our speed drops I pull out my binoculars, peering into the fading light across the desert. It is getting late and darkness is approaching. I am concerned, but beginning to accept, that we won't make our rendezvous with the Americans before last light.

'Who is it?' Steve asks anxiously from the back.

'Don't know yet,' I mutter, trying to make sense of what I see. There are several vehicles, all of them apparently tracked like our own. If these are Iraqis we are in trouble. I stare intently for a few moments more, and then breathe, relieved. I recognise the armoured vehicles as the light tanks used by the 16th/5th Lancers. 'They're Brits!' I say. 'It's our reconnaissance boys.'

'Thank Christ,' says one of the lads over the intercom. We're all feeling a bit exposed here, off on our own.

Our arrival is greeted with great caution by the Lancers, who are part of the mounted reconnaissance force. They are in position to report the location and strength of the Iraqis astride our axis of advance, and have been calling in heavy artillery and air strikes on another objective, called Lead, now off to our right. The light armoured vehicles are no match for enemy tanks—they rely on speed and careful manoeuvring to avoid contact. One of the concerns expressed by the staff back in our headquarters was the fact that some of the Iraqis escaping the attacks have shifted northwards,

cutting through the area occupied by the thinly spread Lancers. It has not escaped my attention that this is the same area we have been sent to. We share a problem with the lonely cluster of men we now roll towards.

I stand erect in my hatch and wave as we cover the final few hundred metres. The barrel of one of the half-dozen vehicles tracks us continuously. I am met by one of the Lancers and led to the officer in charge, a major. This is the tiny headquarters group of his squadron. His troops are several kilometres eastward, overlooking Objective Lead and now beginning to filter around to the sides of the Iraqis to provide information to 7th Brigade. We shake hands as the distant sound of firing comes across the desert.

Our meeting is brief but useful. I am provided with a quick update of nearby enemy movements and I receive a cup of tea, unbidden but welcome. I explain my mission and am concerned to hear they were unaware of my task or of any American presence further north. The major tells me there has been another British soldier killed while we were on the move, hit by a rocket-propelled grenade fired by a group of Iraqis who had appeared to be surrendering, and who promptly gave themselves up. To the credit of the British troops, there was no vengeful outburst, just grim control as they took their enemies into captivity. The soldier, one of the Staffords, is the tenth man to die today. Feeling even more sombre than earlier, I provide my temporary host with the grid reference of the coordination point that we are aiming for, and with that done there is little else to say.

I thank them for the tea and for not shooting us. There is no time to waste, and Pete soon has us heading northeast again with the sky darkening above.

9

FRIGHT NIGHT PART 1

A few minutes after leaving the Lancers, our GPS signal begins to falter and I curse as it finally ceases altogether. The last reading says we have 17 kilometres to go. That means I'll have to navigate by dead reckoning in the darkness. A feeling of deep responsibility and uncertainty settles on me. I order Pete to stop.

'Are we there, boss?'

'No. The GPS has shit itself and I want to take a compass bearing while I am still reasonably confident of where we are. I'm going to jump off for a minute to walk forward so I can take a bearing away from the wagon.'

On the ground, the sand blows around me, restricting my view across the dark desert. I glance at the vehicle to make sure I'm walking out straight, then stride off. I continue for about 50 metres, by which time our vehicle is just an angular shape above the misty swirls of sand. Pulling out my compass, I take a bearing, using the dim glow of the phosphorescent needle and scale to determine the direction to our rendezvous. There is no way I can use a distant object or star to fix the direction. I scuff a short line in the sand with my boot, pointing along the line I have just shot with the compass. It will have to suffice as a way of getting us lined up before we drive off.

Turning, I wave to the vehicle and it rolls towards me. I stand in the wind, letting it come right up to where I am standing before signalling Pete to halt. I look down at the line, judge that the vehicle is sufficiently aligned

and climb back. ‘You’re on the right heading,’ I say to Pete. ‘Try to hold that line. I know there’s nothing to see to help you keep straight, but try to be easy on the steering. Just let her run, which should be roughly straight.’ He understands.

This is going to be bloody difficult. I clamp my helmet and headphones back on my head. There’s no GPS, it’s now dark, there are no features to help me map-read, and we have 17 kilometres to go. Using the light of my small red torch, I pull out my map and mark where I think we are.

‘Do you reckon we can find these buggers, sir?’ Steve asks. There is a clear edginess to his voice. I’m not the only one feeling a bit worried. At least I’m in charge. These guys just have to trust that I’m not going to get them killed. The truth is I’m not entirely sure I can pull this off. It’s going to be very difficult to find the Americans, assuming they are already at the coordination point. Trying to find a nameless spot in the desert or another single vehicle, at night, in the uncertain space between two attacking armoured divisions is distinctly dodgy.

‘We’ll push on using the compass,’ I say. ‘We’ll go about a kilometre then I’ll take another bearing. The GPS could come back at any time and if it does we’ll be fine. Once we get five clicks from the coordination point we’ll stop and make a radio call to the Americans, then take it from there.’ I am trying to sound like I have a valid plan.

‘This is fucked, sir,’ says Steve.

I think before responding, briefly annoyed. ‘Yeah, mate, I agree it’s fucked. But we need to get to that coordination point. Like I explained before we left, our headquarters needs to know where the Americans are. It’s important.’ I share his misgivings but say, ‘Let’s go.’ We go.

And so the pattern begins. We drive steadily forward, a little slower now, trying to hold a straight line across the utterly unmarked desert. From time to time I use the trick of looking up through the base of my compass

held high above my head, but the swinging needle only gives a very approximate heading. It is quite dark but I can dimly make out the horizon, where the cloudy sky is just slightly less dark than the desert. There is nothing to guide me. We have no night-vision equipment so I rely totally on my straining eyes. I regularly ask Pete for a readout on the distance, making the mental conversion from miles to kilometres. Weariness and nerves have blunted my mathematical skills.

When Pete says we've covered a bit over half a mile, I figure we've come roughly a kilometre and I order him to stop. I climb down again and once more walk out in front, not so far this time because the darkness has closed in. I take the bearing, make another mark in the sand, then confirm the heading with a second check of the compass. I wave back towards the vehicle, then wait for it to come up to me. Back on board, I make another small mark on the map along the line showing our route. This primitive navigation technique is all we've got.

The next leg is the same as the last. I repeat the process and walk out into the gloom. I can sense the nerves building in the boys, matching my own. Conversations are clipped and tense and we only speak when necessary. I am aware that with each leg, compounding inaccuracies are creeping into my navigation, but apart from abandoning the task, there is no choice but to continue.

On our sixth stop, I am on the ground taking another bearing when I hear artillery. It is landing some distance away, off to the half left, but the thumping percussion sound is unmistakable. There is a lot of it. Shit. Iraqi? I think not, more likely American. I'd have thought they'd be further east by now. The direction of the falling shells would seem to indicate there are Iraqi positions in front of us, yet to be cleared. Bloody hell! Should we continue? We're still 5 or 6 kilometres short, by my reckoning. I spend an

uncertain few moments pondering options, then decide to make one more bound forward, another kilometre, then reassess the situation.

I climb back on the vehicle and we roll forward again, this time even slower than before, idling over the murky plain. Pete reads off the distance a couple of times, then when we've come far enough I tell him to stop. This time I tell him to cut the engine. There is silence, except for the buffeting of the wind.

There! More artillery! Closer this time. Shit! *Crump! Crump!* Then a rush of overlapping detonations. Then more. This is a big artillery strike. In the darkness it sounds close. I am sitting with just my head out of the hatch; Pete sits likewise in his hole. Fuck! That's getting closer! More rounds are falling, dozens of them.

'I can hear that in here!' says Steve from in the rear—the tension clear in his voice.

'Okay, keep calm, boys,' I say. This isn't the time for general panic. 'Steve, get us on the frequency for the Americans. We need to find out if the coordination point is manned yet.'

A moment or two later I'm set to go. I thumb the radio switch and make the call, announcing ourselves as the British liaison team and our task, to establish a coordination point on the boundary of our two formations, as agreed. I finish my transmission with 'Over' and wait.

Nothing.

'Steve, check that frequency,' I tell him. Surely someone should answer.

'It's the right frequency, sir, and the right call sign,' Steve reports.

Shit. I call again, then wait. Nothing.

'Let's try the alternative frequency,' I say, working hard to sound calm. The sheets of paper with all our radio data provide back-up frequencies.

'Set,' comes Steve's voice a moment later.

I make the call again, explaining our task and asking for any call sign on this frequency to respond.

Nothing.

‘Steve, are we transmitting a signal?’ I ask. I can hear the slight hum of the carrier wave in my headphones, which is a good sign.

‘Let me try from here,’ say Steve. ‘Your headset might be faulty.’ I listen as he too makes a call.

Nothing.

The thumping of artillery is louder now. Then I detect something else, a harmonic beat between the detonations. There are helicopters in the air nearby, almost certainly American Apache attack aircraft. Jesus, this is becoming dangerous.

Suddenly all sounds of the helicopters are drowned out in a flurry of explosions across our front, close enough to see the occasional flash of the detonations. The percussion waves hit a moment later, buffeting our vehicle. I hear the siren sound of shrapnel cutting through the air.

‘Pete, close down!’ I order. ‘Get inside!’

I slam my hatch and shuffle in behind Pete as we both squirm our way back into the rear to join Steve. The red glow from the dome light floods the space with bloody light. Both Steve and Pete are grim-faced.

Outside, the sounds of the artillery are slightly muffled but the thump of the detonations carries clearly through the hull. I speak quickly.

‘Right, try our own headquarters, see if we can get communications with them,’ I tell Steve, who turns to consult a sheet of frequencies before dialling numbers into one of the radios. He has called one of the communications nodes attached to the headquarters. After a moment, a scratchy reply comes through, telling us they can hear us but with interference. Steve acknowledges this and asks them to wait. At least we know the radios are working.

‘What do you want to do now, sir?’ he asks, holding the handset in front of himself. The sense of anxiety that has been building in the last hour is spilling over.

Bloody good question. ‘Tell them thanks, then get us onto the command net.’ If I intend to curtail this mission I’ll need to tell the headquarters.

But I can’t decide not to go through with the task, just because it’s getting dangerous. The commander wouldn’t have sent us up here if it wasn’t necessary. No, this job needs to be done, and we’re going to have to do it. I feel a ball of fear in my chest.

There are more detonations outside and then rapid-fire snapping sounds as a spray of shrapnel hits the side of the wagon.

‘Fuck!’ exclaims Pete and we all duck subconsciously, crunching our bodies into the foetal position. There are more explosions, and another rattle of shrapnel. The noise is very loud now. The vehicle rocks slightly. I visualise one of these rounds landing on top of us, smashing down through the relatively thin armour of the roof, bursting with unimaginable violence among us, killing us all. I think of Jane and our sons, then my parents. I find my hands gripping my calves, head straining down towards my knees. My eyes are open, staring at the camouflage pattern in my chemical suit. More artillery falls. One of the boys shouts but I can’t make out his words. We ride the storm.

Eventually, the artillery stops. It just stops. Then the sound of detonations comes again, but some distance away. I sit up, as do Steve and Pete. Fear floats like a mist in the confined space. No-one speaks.

‘Oh shit,’ says Steve. ‘Shit!’ He is clearly very frightened. Pete sits, ashen-faced.

‘Is everyone all right?’ I say, my voice a bit wobbly. Steve sits straighter and I see Pete nod. No-one is hurt. ‘That was close,’ is all I can

think to add.

‘Too fucking close!’ Pete says. He looks very young and very frightened.

My mind races. The ball of fear in my chest has become painful. The desire to get out of this place, to just turn the vehicle around and drive south, is very strong. I ask myself, what the hell are we doing up here all on our own? This is stupid! A flush of anger courses through me. Get a grip! These two soldiers need you to act like a leader, to take charge and make it okay. I have recollections of countless lessons and discussions of leadership, during those now far-off days when I was training for war, wondering what it was like, fantasising about commanding in battle. Well, this isn’t theoretical. This is real and it’s happening right now. I realise I need to marshal my fear.

‘Steve,’ I say, trying to sound confident, ‘get us back on the American frequency. We need to sort this mess out. Pete, get a bottle of water out for us.’ These are hardly momentous tasks but they will give them something to do. I need time to think. Do we keep trying to complete this task? Maybe we can try it another way?

I clear my throat, then make another call to the Americans. There is no reply. I make another call, this time asking for anyone listening on this frequency to respond. The radio squawks briefly as I release the transmit button and for a moment I think someone will answer. Then silence again, just the muttering of the artillery in the distance.

‘All right,’ I say, looking at Steve and Pete in turn, ‘we can’t get communications with the Americans. They are either not close enough or we’ve got the wrong frequencies. Is there a chance we have the wrong frequencies, Steve?’

‘No, sir, I’ve checked them a couple of times,’ replies Steve, his voice not quite level.

‘Okay, fine,’ I say, ‘then they can’t hear us.’

I notice that Steve isn’t looking at me, but rather is gazing over my shoulder, staring at the photos of his pregnant wife.

‘Steve, Pete,’ I say, ‘we need to make radio contact with these guys. We can’t raise them, either because there is some interference, or maybe there is some higher ground off to the north we can’t see. Whatever the problem is, we need to fix it.’ I look up at both of the young men with me—knowing what I am about to say will not go down well. ‘We need to put up the big antenna. We need to get outside.’

The big antenna is stashed on top of the vehicle. It is made of about eight lightweight metal tubes that can be fitted together to make a tall radio mast. The antenna is fitted to the top tube, then the next section is attached beneath the first one, then another, and so on, building the antenna from the top downwards. As the antenna becomes taller it is normally stabilised by guide ropes attached part way up the mast. We’ve put it up a few times previously when we were having communication problems, and it took all three of us. It’s not something you really want to do in the dark. It certainly isn’t something you want to do when there is artillery falling not too far away. But as far as I can see, we have no choice.

There is a silence. The apprehension that hangs between us thickens perceptibly.

Pete speaks first. ‘You’ve got to be kidding, boss,’ he says. ‘We’d have to get up on top of the vehicle, right up on top, just to get it down and unpack it. We’d be like shags on a rock up there,’ he adds. ‘If that artillery starts again we’re fucked.’

‘We’ll just have to get it down quickly,’ I respond. ‘We’ll chuck it off the top of the wagon and work right beside the vehicle. We won’t use the guide ropes, too much rooting around. We’ll jam the base up against the

side of the wagon and lash it there if we need to,' I explain, as much for my own benefit as that of my crew.

'Right,' says Pete flatly, unconvinced but not prepared to say any more.

I turn to Steve. 'You okay?'

The distant sound of falling shells punctuates the silence that follows my question. 'I don't know if I can do it, sir,' Steve says quietly. His eyes are clamped to the photographs of his wife.

My mind races. Did he just refuse an order?

'Steve,' I say, 'this isn't optional. We need to get that antenna up and we can't do it without you. I've explained why this is important. We can't just quit because we're scared. We're all scared, mate, I can tell you, but we need to try everything before I tell the general that we can't do what he sent us to do.' It's not a great speech but it's the best I can manage.

There is another long silence. I can see the emotions battling across Steve's face. I feel sorry for him. But another part of me is in turmoil. What if these two refuse to do what I ask? I'd have to give a direct order, but then what? What if one of them just tells me to fuck off? Do I draw my pistol? What the hell would I do with it? For a moment, my own fear subsides slightly as the difficulty of the situation grips me.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Steve says, his voice small.

Shit, I think. Shit, shit, shit!

'Steve,' I say, very carefully, 'Pete, we need to put that fucking antenna up. I need all three of us to do it. Now I'm going to open that door,' pointing to the latched and bolted rear door, 'and I'm going to climb out and get on with it.' I pause for a moment, my own fear rising again in my throat at the thought of being outside, exposed to whatever comes this way. 'I'm going to go to ground on the right side of the vehicle, and when I look around I expect to see both of you there behind me.'

I look at Pete. 'Pete?' He nods, hands grasped before him.

I look at Steve. ‘Steve?’ I ask. He says nothing.

There is only one thing to do, and that’s what I just said. ‘We’re going,’ I say, and push into a half crouch, stepping past Steve to the rear door. I snap open the combat lock, then the door latch itself, pushing the door outwards. Cold air washes in from the darkness. I go through the door, gain my footing on the sand and then take three quick steps to the right rear of the vehicle before dropping on my belly. The fear buzzes in my head.

I lie there a few moments, staring out into the night, looking for threats. The artillery is still booming away in the dark ahead of us.

I crane my neck to look behind me. Even in the darkness I can see that the form dropping onto the sand at my side is Steve. I hear as much as see another body drop to the desert floor behind him. Jesus, they came! A sudden sensation of relief fills me. Bugger me, they came! I take a moment to think about the courage that both of them have just shown. They overcame real fear. Not just the ‘I’m a bit nervous’ kind of fear, but real, justified fear that for a moment had unhinged us all, to varying degrees. I feel a rush of pride in the two young men beside me.

‘Let’s get on with it,’ I say, my voice louder than I intended and a bit shaky.

In the end, it is easier than I expected. Pete refuses to let anyone else on top of the vehicle to unlash the bundled antenna, his new determination stirring in me another wave of admiration. He scampers above us and there is a jangling thump as the bag containing the poles lands on the sand.

‘Steve,’ I say, ‘take charge of putting this thing together.’ He needs to have some responsibility shoved his way, but just as importantly he is the senior signaller here and he knows better than me how to get the antenna up quickly.

We wrestle the metal tubes, cables and ropes out of the bag and snap it all together. We work as a team, huddled around the mast emerging from

our midst.

Without warning, an artillery bombardment comes close again. There is a sudden whistling sound before the thuds and cracks of shells landing just a few hundred metres away.

‘Down!’ I shout and we flop onto the sand, dropping the antenna. Fear again courses through me. God! The buzz of shrapnel being hurled out from the shells carries clearly above the sound of the explosions. The sand under my belly jumps and shivers.

Then, just as suddenly as it started, the bombardment stops. We lie there for long seconds. More artillery is falling off in the distance, but here it is quiet again. ‘Fuck me dead,’ says one of the boys.

We eventually regain our feet, retrieve the toppled mast and resume our task. Each of us mutters some obscenity as the peak of fear washes past. As we work, I am again struck by the simple courage of these two young soldiers. It bolsters my own shaky core.

With the antenna tip some 5 metres or more above us, we jam the base leg of the mast against the vehicle. Steve follows my direction to get back inside and attach the antenna cable to the radio, which is soon accomplished.

First I, then Steve, make repeated calls on both the main and secondary frequency. There is no reply, not the slightest squawk or flicker of a response. No happy ending.

Fuck. The word stands in my mind then I utter it with conviction. ‘Fuck!’ Once again a feeling of fear, now mixed with futility, fills the small space in the back of our vehicle. Steve and Pete are looking at me. I can almost read their thoughts: it’s time to call it quits.

We haven’t achieved the task we were given, that much is clear. No-one is answering any of our radio calls. I could call our headquarters and tell them the task is a non-starter. But we haven’t actually reached the

coordination point—we're still about 5 kilometres short, by my reckoning. It is possible there is someone from the 1st US Infantry Division there, but with radio problems, or the wrong frequency information. Or they might still be trying to reach the rendezvous and are waiting to get there before calling on the advertised radio frequency. It's even possible they were intercepted en route, or ran into some Iraqis when they arrived. Maybe there are even people at the coordination point who need help. There are several other possibilities, but all point to just one conclusion.

We need to push on to the coordination point.

'All right, guys,' I begin. 'Here's the deal.' I recount my brief mental review to them and it is greeted with silence, except for their mutual slow exhalation. My thoughts have crystallised as I speak. 'We're going to wait here for a while, maybe twenty minutes, so we can let whatever the hell is happening to our north settle down or pass by. I can't really figure out any pattern to the artillery fire but there's been none falling near us for a bit so I reckon we're safe for now.' I reflect for a moment on this assertion—it is not really true by a wide margin but such estimates have become relative tonight. 'We leave the big antenna up and try calling some more. Before we move off again, we'll also update our headquarters. If we get to the coordination point and can't find anyone or get anyone on the radio, we'll bin it and ask for new orders.'

There is a pause while the boys take this in, then murmurs of agreement.

So we wait. Our calls to the Americans continue to go unanswered. I sit in my hatch, helmet and headphones slightly askew on my head so I can hear the sounds around us. The artillery bombardment is still a muttering rumble, but it now sounds more distant. Despite the lack of immediate threats, I sense the ongoing strain in my two crewmen. No-one talks unless I ask them a question. Tiredness again laps at my mind like an incoming

tide. Once, I catch myself nodding. Wake up, you idiot! You'll get us all killed!

The sound of artillery shifts, then ceases. Eventually, after straining my ears and eyes to the north to try to detect any movement or threats, I am satisfied that we can continue. I make a short transmission to our headquarters, telling them we've been delayed by artillery fire, that we still have not established radio contact, but that we are continuing to the coordination point as planned. This acknowledged, I order the dismantling of the mast. The bundled tubes are soon once again strapped onto the roof of our wagon. Climbing back into my hatch I check the GPS receiver for the umpteenth time and this time, to my great relief, it is working. 'Great timing, you piece of shit.'

But even this small improvement lasts only a short time. A few kilometres after we begin our advance to the northeast, the GPS fluctuates several times, dropping then regaining a fix on the necessary satellites. My own spirits plummet the first time this happens. As I am about to order Pete to stop and once again begin the risky business of making manual compass checks, the GPS recovers. We continue, but the acid in my stomach from the continuous nerves now burns my chest.

Finally, somewhere around 9 p.m., we arrive. We slow to a crawl, both Pete and I straining to see something, anything, that might be an American outpost. When the GPS, now functioning properly again, tells me we are at the exact spot, I order Pete to halt then switch off the engine. Silence and darkness envelop us.

There is no-one here.

10

FRIGHT NIGHT PART 2

The sound is faint at first, but it builds steadily. It's the thrum of helicopter blades—the chilling sound of an Apache attack helicopter. These things are killing machines, designed to find and destroy tanks, vehicles, bunkers or people with robotic efficiency. They are equipped with missiles, dozens of small rockets, a heavy cannon and advanced night-vision sights. And now there's at least one of them nearby, on the prowl. The bile catches in my throat again as a new fear hits me. Out here, in a lone armoured vehicle far from other friendly forces, there's every chance some trigger-happy bastard might mistake us for Iraqis.

We have called repeatedly on the radio, trying to establish contact with the Americans, but the silence continues. We've also driven in a large circle around the designated meeting point, in case they are hidden by the darkness. Nothing. Back at the coordination point I tell Pete to kill the engine.

It is when I pull my headphones off that I first hear the helicopter. Then I see it. Surprisingly, it has its navigation lights on, small green and red points of light in the blackness. It seems to be only a kilometre away, off to our north. Then there is a spurt of flame from the sky and a missile streaks away into the darkness. A brief flash appears in the distance as it hits some unseen target. The beat of the rotor blades continues. Further away, I see another splash of flame in the sky and a brief flash of light on the desert floor. It's a second helicopter.

I pull my headphones back on. ‘There are a couple of Apaches off to our north, shooting up some Iraqis. One’s closer than the other.’

‘Are they coming this way?’ asks Steve.

‘I don’t know, but the closest one can’t be more than a click or two away. The worry is they might see us and decide we’re a target.’

‘Fucking brilliant,’ says Pete.

‘We need to watch in case they come this way,’ I tell Pete, a note of urgency creeping into my voice. ‘Do you see the lights?’

‘Yeah, I see ’em,’ he answers tersely.

‘The lights are navigation lights. The red light is on the left side of the aircraft and the green is on the other side, you know, like on a ship. If we only see either the red or green light, then it means the helicopter is flying side on. But if we see both lights, with the red one on the *right* as we look at it, it means it’s pointing towards us.’ I pause for a moment to let this sink in. ‘You get it?’

‘Yeah, I get it,’ comes his strained reply.

‘We need to watch the lights. If it looks like the bastard is going to have a crack at us we’ll need to get off the vehicle and run.’

‘What?’ Steve splutters over the intercom. ‘You reckon they’re going to attack us?’

‘No, no, they’re working some other targets not far away, but they might get curious about us, sitting out here all on our own and think we’re Iraqis,’ I say, trying hard to speak evenly to keep both guys calm.

‘Jesus! Let’s just fuck off!’ Steve comes back. ‘Let’s get the fuck out of here!’

At that moment Pete shouts. ‘Boss! The lights! The chopper is coming this way!’

Shit, he’s right! The lights are steady pinpricks of colour, red on the right, green on the left. They are definitely pointed our way. There is a

slight change in the sound, like the helicopter has gone into a hover. I know with sudden, complete certainty they have seen us.

The fear hits me like a body blow. I have a mental picture of the helicopter crew looking through their night sights, trying to decide who and what we might be, deciding whether or not to shoot. Images of the mangled headless bodies of the Iraqis we'd seen a few hours earlier also leap through my mind. I force them away, but when I start to speak I feel my jaw tight with tension.

'Steve!' I blurt. 'Get the back door open! Now! Headsets off! Get ready to run! Pete, get down there with him!' I hear one of the boys say, 'Oh fuck.'

'Don't go yet! Wait for me to shout! If we need to, run for it, a couple of hundred metres straight behind us. We'll meet up there!' I can hear my breathing, quick and fearful, over the bumping sounds of Pete wriggling back into the rear of the vehicle.

'This is so fuckin' fucked!' yells Steve as the rear door is opened.

The instinct to run is very strong. I try to decide what to do as the seconds snap past. If we suddenly start bailing out, won't that look like we're Iraqis? We're on the boundary between the Americans and the British, but who's to say if the helicopter crew is aware how close to the boundary they are? And they've just been shooting at some other target. 'Stay where you are!' I shout. 'We might look more like Iraqis if we bolt! Stay put!' All of us are saturated with fear, our minds and hearts are racing at incredible speed—everything is in overdrive. I think I am going to die. Jane! Our boys! Then I remember the torch. *The torch!*

I reach into my pocket for my small red torch and turn it on. I stand as high as I can in the hatch, only my legs inside, and begin waving my arms, pointing the torch at the helicopter. I want them to know we've seen them

and aren’t a threat. ‘Don’t shoot, you bastards,’ I plead. ‘Please, don’t shoot.’

Time stops as the beat of the helicopter blades drones on. The red and green lights stare back at me in the darkness. I wait for the flash of a missile, knowing we’ll only have seconds to get out of the vehicle if they fire. ‘Don’t shoot!’ I say to the night again, waving my arms. I fight the urge to jump off the vehicle and run. ‘Don’t shoot!’ I repeat over and over.

After an eternity I see the red and green lights move, shifting closer together for a moment, then the green light winks out. The red light is visible, then it too is gone. The sound of the whirring blades picks up in tempo. I stare at the spot in the sky where I last saw the lights, then I realise what has happened. They’ve gone. The helicopter has gone. They’ve turned away and headed further north. I let out a great shuddering breath.

‘It’s okay!’ I shout to the boys inside. ‘They’re leaving, they’ve pissed off!’

There is a pause.

‘Are you sure?’ asks Steve.

‘Yeah, I’m sure. We’re all right.’ I sound unconvincing, even to myself. The beat of the helicopter noise fades to silence.

‘Shit, sir,’ says Steve eventually. ‘We’re gunna get killed out here.’

He’s right, I realise. This task is looking like being a waste of time, a potentially deadly waste of time. All we’re doing is presenting ourselves as a target for someone; the Iraqis or, more likely, the Americans.

‘Pete, get back up here,’ I say. ‘Steve, try calling the Yanks one more time. If we don’t get through I’ll tell our headquarters that this job’s a bust.’

‘Thank Christ,’ one of them says. I listen again to the empty silence on the radio. Steve calls several times, switching frequencies, all to no avail.

‘All right, we won’t waste any more time on that. Get me onto our command frequency.’

A moment later he tells me the frequency is set and I call our headquarters. The response is weak and scratchy but clear enough to understand. I explain that there are no Americans at the coordination point and that we're not getting any response on any of the assigned radio frequencies. I also tell them that we seem to be close to the advancing US line of assault, and give my best guess as to how far east they've come. I don't mention the helicopter. Finally, I add my assessment that this coordination task seems to be a failure and ask for new orders. There is a delay then I am told to wait.

Sitting in my hatch, I talk to the lads a little, trying to sound positive. The spent adrenaline is making me feel slightly nauseous. In the quiet, as we wait, I think of my family. The urge to be with them is overwhelming. I want to hug Jane, to feel her against me. I want to wrestle with my boys and hear them laugh.

Finally, the radio crackles into life and I hear our new orders. 'You are to move fifteen kilometres east from your present location,' says the faint voice in my headphones, 'to establish a new coordination point to link up with the US forces.' This is followed by new radio frequencies, which I scribble down, even though I'm confident Steve will be making notes. I ask what time I need to be at the new location. 'As soon as possible,' comes the reply. I acknowledge the orders and sign off.

Another coordination point?

'Jesus, boss,' says Steve, 'this is getting bloody hairy. Do you know if any of our blokes are that far east?'

'Hang on,' I say, using my torch to peer at the map in my lap, on which I have marked the rough locations of the objectives the British force is planning to attack. Then I measure 15 kilometres east from the cross marking our present position and make another mark on the map. It seems to be a long way from any British units. 'No, there aren't any of our guys

especially close to where we're going but it's been a fair while since I updated my map. I think the objective closest to the new coordination point should have been cleaned up by 7th Brigade by now.'

There's not really much to discuss. We've got a job to do, despite the risks. 'Let's get going,' I say.

We head to the east of the advancing Americans. From time to time there are flashes of explosions behind us. At another point we see a heavy artillery bombardment to our southeast, where the British advance continues. Now that we're moving again there is little talk, only the occasional modification of directions and a few snatches of commentary when we encounter some gently rolling terrain in contrast to the flatness we've become used to. With each passing kilometre, I feel more and more isolated. We are heading into completely uncharted territory, where no Coalition troops have yet been. I have to assume the blokes back in our headquarters know what they're doing, but as we make our way through the darkness, I have little confidence.

Thankfully, the GPS stays true and we eventually approach the new location, slowing down as we draw near the appointed spot. Steve has dialled in the new frequency and I make a radio call. There is no reply. I call again with the same result. Suddenly, anger flushes through me. Who the hell is coordinating this fucked-up mission? Surely someone has checked these frequencies? I feel my pulse beating in my throat as I try to calm myself. Don't unsettle the boys any more than they already are. 'Keep it going, Pete,' I say, trying hard to sound unflustered, 'let's see if there's anyone at this rendezvous.'

We find ourselves alone in yet another empty patch of dark desert. I order Pete to switch off for a while so we can listen, but all we hear is the muttering of explosions off in the distance. I tell Steve to get us onto our command frequency again and then call our headquarters. I report that

we’ve arrived in the new location but once again have found it unmanned and that there has been no response on the assigned radio frequencies. As I make this report, I see Pete slowly shaking his head in disgust.

There is a delay for a few moments, then a new voice comes on the radio. I don’t recognise it but the message is clear. ‘There has been a change in the enemy picture,’ I am told by the distant officer. ‘Your task there is cancelled. You are to marry-up with the headquarters of 7th Brigade and remain with them until further notice.’ Map coordinates for the headquarters follow.

I stare down at my map in the torchlight, roughly marking the new rendezvous position. It is at least 30 kilometres away and behind us, off to the southwest. Behind us, I think. ‘What is the current forward line of our own troops?’ I ask, wanting to know where the leading combat forces of the brigade are located.

The answer comes a minute or so later, and when I plot this line on my map it is clear that we’re further forward than the nearest friendly combat forces. Great. Just great, I think, trying to suppress my anger. We’ll have to approach a bunch of our tanks and combat vehicles from the direction of the enemy. I point this out to the man on the other end of the radio and ask that the leading troops be warned of our approach. I finish by saying that I won’t be moving from this spot until I’ve had confirmation of this.

‘Very well, we’ll call you again shortly.’ The crackling goes dead briefly, then someone else starts transmitting, calling another unit. It reminds me that our situation is just one minor activity in the great swirl of urgent tasks as the headquarters plans and organises each step across a vast battlefield.

The lads have the same sense of dread—we’ll be driving towards our own tanks from the enemy side, knowing that for the last twenty-four hours our guys have been shooting vehicles thought to be Iraqi. The only thing

that will prevent one of them killing us on sight is a radio call to warn them that some idiot has got themselves on the wrong side of our front line. Having been a commander of a tank force, I know how many other radio calls will be flashing across their radio nets, passing information, map references, ammunition states, orders to adjust positions, plus a hundred other messages. In the midst of this will come the message about our situation. Will everyone get the message?

After a long wait we get the call assuring me the leading troops are aware that we'll be approaching from the northeast. The message includes a radio frequency for the headquarters of 7th Brigade, who will coordinate our movement through the tanks.

I brief the boys and we head off, turning towards the southwest and the British tanks. The occasional extended rumbling and flashing of fire from the south stretches our nerves. The GPS is still working okay and I am thankful for this one mercy. We roll on, Pete and I straining our eyes, peering forward and around us, alert for trouble. The long hours of darkness have acutely sharpened our night vision and now there is a little light from the sky, perhaps due to the moon rising behind the clouds.

After a bit I see what appears to be disturbed sand, lumped and misshapen. Then another pile of sand appears, and another. 'Pete! Stop! I think we're in an Iraqi position.'

I tug our machine gun around in front of me, grasping the pistol grip. 'Switch off,' I say. The engine rattles to a stop. We listen. There is only the sound of the wind and the muted percussion of distant artillery. There is no sign of movement or any light from the mounds around us.

'It might be an abandoned position,' I say quietly over the intercom. No-one answers. We listen again. Nothing.

'Start up,' I order. Pete thumbs the starter and the diesel engine clatters back to life. 'Let's keep going.' We roll forward again. Shortly a larger

shape emerges. It looks like a large bunker of some sort and I steer Pete away from it. More signs of digging appear and we steer to avoid them. We are moving slowly now, barely ticking over.

Suddenly, I see men standing off to our right. Half a dozen at least! A pulse of fear hits me. ‘Men on the ground, two o’clock!’ I blurt over the intercom. I swing the machine gun towards them, expecting to see the flicker of muzzle flashes at any second. I am about to squeeze the trigger but even as I watch, heart pounding, they drift away, into the night.

‘They’ve gone!’ Pete says. ‘Jesus!’ he exclaims. ‘Did they see us?’

‘I don’t know,’ I reply. ‘Maybe they just want to get the hell away from here, before they get attacked.’

I take a deep breath, which wavers out of my chest. ‘Keep going, Pete, keep an eye out. There might be more. Hopefully they won’t want to fight. We definitely don’t want a fight. One rocket-propelled grenade and we’re history.’ I regret my words as soon as I have spoken them. None of us needs the danger reinforced.

We roll on. Twice more we see groups of Iraqi soldiers retreating. One of the groups comes within a hundred metres and I frantically order Pete to steer away from them. No-one shoots and we dash into the cover of darkness. My nerves are as taut as the strings in a piano. The situation seems bizarre—there are enemy soldiers around us but we dare not try to attack or capture any of them, for fear of finding ourselves in the centre of a hornet’s nest. And they dare not attack us. All this could change with one nervous shot.

I check our progress on the GPS and refer to my map. Not too far to go now. I decide to make a radio call to the 7th Brigade headquarters. After all the unanswered radio calls of the night, it is a relief to hear a crisp reply. I tell them who we are and ask if they are aware that we are returning to

friendly lines from the northeast. To my relief, I get a positive response to this question.

‘Can you confirm that the forward troops have the message too?’ I ask, not caring that the fear in my voice is evident.

‘Yes, the message has been passed on and acknowledged.’

I thank the officer and sign off with an estimated time of arrival.

‘You get all that, boys?’ I ask my crew. Each of them answers with a short ‘Yes’ and then there is silence on the intercom again.

Now for the really dangerous part as we close the final few kilometres to where the forward British tanks lie. As I’ve been doing for so many hours, I strain to see ahead as we rumble across the desert. The light from the moon helps but I am exhausted by fatigue and stress. The headache that has nagged at me since before the ground attack commenced pounds in my temples, and my eyes ache.

Then I see a solid dark shape in the distance, almost straight ahead. It is a tank. I see a tiny wink of orange light—it is the light of the barrel alignment system fitted to British tanks to ensure the gunner’s sights and the barrel remain on the same axis. I know it can only be seen from directly ahead. It means only one thing: the crew of the tank has us in their sights. I know at this moment the commander and gunner are staring at their screens, which show a thermal image of our vehicle glowing hot in the cold Iraqi night. We are at their mercy as they try to identify what type of vehicle we are and decide whether to shoot. A round will have been loaded into the chamber of the massive gun, which points directly at us. It will only take the word ‘Fire!’ and a projectile, capable of destroying a tank, will burst from the muzzle at several times the speed of sound, crossing the short distance to our vehicle in milliseconds, punching through the steel plate and metal engine with such energy that the temperature inside will spike to several hundred degrees in a fraction of a second. Steve, Pete and I will be

dead in an instant. The vehicle will almost certainly burn after the hit, with our corpses in it.

All this flickers through my mind as I lurch up as high as I can in my hatch. I raise my hands high above my head, in a sign that we present no threat. ‘There’s a tank ahead of us, a British tank,’ I say over the intercom. I can hear how odd my voice sounds. The fear has caught in my vocals, distorting my words. ‘Drive on, Pete, nice and slow.’

I stand there, arms outstretched, staring at the dark mass of steel coming closer as we move slowly forward. I again find myself begging the tank crew to hold their fire. Don’t shoot, boys! I think, over and over. The cold wind in my face is nothing compared to the chill of fear in my guts. Don’t shoot! Please, don’t shoot!

The distance closes and then we are coming right up to it. I keep my arms up high. ‘Stop alongside,’ I tell Pete. We draw level with the huge tank, only a metre separating us. I see the commander stand up in his hatch and I order Pete to cut the engine. I pull off my headphones and step off our vehicle’s front deck onto one of the tool bins along the side of the tank, leaning close to the tank commander. I want no confusion over nationalities so I say, ‘I’m a British officer.’

‘Bollocks! Not with that fucking accent!’ says the tank commander with a hint of a laugh.

We’ve made it. For the moment, we are safe.

11

A DESERT DASH

Once we pass the British tanks the last part of our journey is uneventful, although it is difficult to find the headquarters among the mass of armoured vehicles. Men are sleeping on the ground next to their machines and I dismount to guide Pete through by torchlight, worried that we may accidentally run over someone in the crowded scatter.

Finally I find the headquarters of 7th Brigade and signal Pete to cut the engine. I tell the boys to have a brew and get some sleep. Tiredness weighs heavily on me and I suck cold air into my lungs to clear my head. Annexes have been erected off the rear of several vehicles and I enter through the flap and into the harsh fluorescent light. Glancing about, I look for a familiar face and recognise an officer I know. The firm, friendly handshake is surprisingly comforting after the lonely hours in no-man's-land.

After a chat he points me to the operations desk and I report in. There are a few good-natured jokes about my wandering ways and having come back into the fold from the enemy side, and again I am relieved to be safe. Despite the cheerful banter, tiredness is etched into the faces of the officers as they scribble orders and listen to radio reports. This war seems to be a battle against sleep deprivation as much as the Iraqis.

I receive a brief update on the battle, which is going well. Managing the large number of prisoners is testing the administrative staff as well as tying up some of the fighting troops. The advance has gone so rapidly that there is a dearth of intelligence about just where the Iraqis are and what their

intentions might be. Some are still offering resistance, and occasionally the flat bang of a tank round can be heard through the canvas walls. But there is a sense of indecision while the senior commanders wrestle with how to deliver the final blow. Just before my arrival the brigade commander, Brigadier Cordingley, received orders to make a rapid advance further eastwards towards a large area known as Objective Varsity at first light, only about four hours away. The brigadier is now trying to snatch a couple of hours' rest before the advance.

I call my own headquarters, deliver a short report and am ordered to remain with 7th Brigade until further notice. Terrific news; I've had my fill of solo adventures. The weariness I have been fighting now swamps me and I can feel myself rocking on my feet. I walk back outside and let my eyes readjust to the dark.

In the gloom I spot a fuel truck and hear its pump, delivering diesel. Fuel! Why didn't I think of it before? When I reach the truck I get a gruff response from a weary, harassed soldier but he agrees to follow me to my vehicle. I am so tired it takes me a while to find it. When I do, I shake Pete awake. Steve stirs too and both of them climb up onto the vehicle to free the fuel caps from under our lashed-down gear. I hunt for my pack and pull out my sleeping bag.

With the vehicle's fuel tank full, we huddle together in the darkness and I tell them what I know. There's no need for anyone to man the radio for the next few hours but we need to be ready by 0500. They look so tired. We set our alarms and retreat to our sleeping bags, and as I stretch out on the sand beside the vehicle I think briefly of the horrible sights and moments of terror since we left the headquarters yesterday. Thankfully I am soon mugged by sleep.

‹ ›

Three hours later I am sipping coffee and eating a satchel of cold food. I've confirmed the plans and am told to stick with the 7th Brigade command group during the advance. No worries, I say, suits me just fine. Now, sitting with Pete and Steve in the dim interior of our wagon, I peer at the map spread on my knees. It shows few features, just vast tracts marked 'desert'. The only landmark of note is a wide, shallow valley about 30 kilometres off to the east, the Wadi al Batin. It marks the border between Iraq and Kuwait. We are headed straight for it. Near the wadi, on this side, the map shows a thin, dark scratch marked as 'oil pipeline'.

As the time for the advance draws near I stand beside our vehicle, watching the light slowly illuminating the force scattered across the desert. Men are climbing over their vehicles, adjusting loads or reassembling machine guns and rifles after the morning ritual of cleaning their weapons. Someone is taking a shit in full view of those around him; there's nowhere else to go and no-one pays him any notice. Then, without fanfare, the first few vehicles splutter into life and I climb aboard. Our trusty steed starts and we begin to move. Ahead, the tanks and infantry fighting vehicles are already rolling eastwards at speed, and the headquarters group accelerates to keep up. A great number of tan-coloured vehicles are all roaring along, trailing plumes of dark exhaust smoke. The wind in my face is cold and moist, and dark-grey clouds stifle the morning light.

Suddenly there is a flash up ahead as one of the tanks fires without even stopping. The sharp thud of the firing reaches me on the wind, and further ahead there is a brief white spark as the round strikes a target. A report crackles in my headphones; 'Stationary enemy tank, destroyed' is the sum of the matter. A short time later we slow down, then halt for a time as a heavy artillery bombardment is launched overhead from the guns and rocket systems behind us. I see the telltale white streaks of smoke from the launching rockets, then up ahead come the flicker and rumble of falling

shells. The artillery attack completed, we are rolling once more, and again our advance is punctuated by the firing of tanks as we encounter more and more enemy vehicles.

As we roll on, we pass the shattered hulks of the Iraqi vehicles. Some burn fiercely as their ammunition and fuel incinerates; others smoulder sullenly, seemingly ready to explode at any moment. I have a flashback to us approaching the British tanks last night; the fear of being blown apart by a tank round momentarily grips me, but this is quickly pushed aside by the drama of this charge. We pass a group of Iraqi armoured personnel carriers, all of them on fire.

Abandoned fighting trenches slide past, surrounded by the litter of a hasty departure—blankets, ration tins, boxes and rubbish blowing in the wind. I am startled by a roaring clatter just above us and look up to see a flock of British Lynx attack helicopters bristling with weapons. My neighbour from back in Germany pilots one of these aircraft and I wonder if Paul is at the controls.

We see several groups of Iraqis, standing fearfully with arms raised as we approach. Sometimes a vehicle stops beside these frightened, miserable men to quickly check them for weapons before sending them walking back down the line to be processed as POWs. On other occasions we sail past the forlorn Iraqis, who silently plead for us to stop. But there is no room on our vehicles for prisoners. No time to stop. The juggernaut rolls on.

A message comes in that American tanks have accidentally crossed into our area and attacked a British reconnaissance team. One of our vehicles has been destroyed. Amazingly the crew had dismounted just before the attack and managed to escape being killed. Another group was not so lucky and there are reports of several wounded British soldiers. The American tanks have headed off northwards without stopping or being identified. It could so easily have been our fate over the last few days.

By mid-morning we are nearing the Wadi al Batin. Rapid orders crackle across the radio and a plan is quickly hatched to cross the oil pipeline, which has surprised everyone by its enormous size. Someone has found a spot where a crude sand ramp has been bulldozed over the pipe, and engineers are called forward to check it for mines. Artillery goes in ahead to shield the advancing forces during this vulnerable time. Soon another crossing point is located and before long we are part of a stream of vehicles bumping our way over the pipeline and back onto the flatness beyond.

I soon sense the ground sloping gently down ahead of us and realise we have reached the wadi. I had expected something a little more dramatic but it is just a featureless depression running north–south, perhaps a kilometre across. As we climb the slope out of the wadi I announce to the lads that we've just crossed into Kuwait.

'I guess this is what we came here for,' says Steve.

'It looks a lot like Iraq, and that was a shithole too,' Pete adds.

The excitement of the charge, and the few hours of sleep, have lifted our spirits. I invite Steve to squeeze up next to me, and our little crew spends the next hour or more in a tight group, Pete in his hole and Steve and I jammed close together in the commander's hatch. We point and comment on the sights around us. We watch tanks shooting and destroying targets kilometres away to our front across the flat plain. We gawk at the burning Iraqi tanks and trucks as we roll past them. We feel like winners.

Inevitably we run into minefields. We veer around the first one we encounter. Later, we come across another laid in great haste. The mines had not even been buried but scattered across the sand in a random pattern. In places the clumps of mines are close together and we pick our way through. They sit on the damp sand like fat dinner plates, variously green, tan or grey in colour. Elsewhere, they're well separated and we drive brashly around them, carving curved tracks until we reach clear sand and a straight run.

Contact reports flash over the radio and Pete brings us to a halt while ahead Challenger tanks and Warrior fighting vehicles engage the enemy. None of the Iraqis who still choose to fight can match the firepower, and these relatively minor confrontations end quickly. Through my binoculars, during one of these short, sharp battles I see an Iraqi armoured personnel carrier suddenly make a dash for safety. Within seconds it is nailed by several lethal shots from British tanks and it bursts into fierce flames.

While the leading combat troops are preparing to clear yet another Iraqi outpost, several rounds of artillery fall among the dozens of vehicles spread around us. We all duck for cover while the radio runs hot with reports and questions about the fire. Is it ours? No, comes the answer, and someone on the radio remarks on the courage or foolhardiness of the Iraqi gunners who have fired this desultory bombardment. I silently agree. Lynx helicopters are called forward to hunt them down. Instead they find several enemy tanks, which they quickly destroy. However, we soon discover they are dummy tanks, knocked up from wood and a few steel pipes. I can imagine the chagrin the helicopter pilots must have felt at being so convincingly fooled, and our crew shares a laugh at their expense.

By early afternoon we are on Objective Varsity, some 30 kilometres inside Kuwait. Apart from the now familiar scattering of abandoned Iraqi vehicles and equipment, there is nothing remarkable about this particular patch of desert. The brigade arranges into a rough defensive perimeter, and shortly afterwards I meet with a group of officers at the rear of one of the headquarters vehicles. We are told that Major General Smith, the British division commander, is about to arrive by helicopter. A landing area is quickly prepared with a large orange marker panel and we soon hear the beat of approaching helicopter blades. For the third time today a shiver runs through me as I recall the fear and tension of our confrontation with the

American Apache helicopter the night before. I shake off the unease and look to where the general's helicopter is landing.

Rupert Smith emerges, looking worn and haggard. When I met him back in Germany I was surprised by his youthful appearance, but this war seems to have aged him. I feel a pang of sympathy for the burden of responsibility he has borne in recent weeks. Despite his appearance, his voice is clear and calm as he talks with the brigadier and imparts a sense of urgency to get the job done. 'The end of all this is in sight,' he says. 'The Iraqis in front of us are all but defeated and we'll probably finish this in the next few days.' He reminds us we are still at war and need to be ready to fight.

Before he leaves he asks for a private conversation with the brigadier and I follow the others as we walk back towards our vehicles. Soon afterwards, his helicopter clatters back into the air and he is gone. Within minutes of his departure, it starts raining heavily.

The brigade commander summons the three unit commanders to a meeting. When they arrive, I am permitted to join them. I stand with the others behind the folding chairs set out for the more senior officers. The rain has lifted to a drizzle.

They are pleased with what has been achieved so far. The three lieutenant colonels quickly summarise their units' actions. The tally is remarkable, including dozens and dozens of Iraqi tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other vehicles destroyed. The brigade has taken more than 2,000 prisoners.

Several of the commanding officers fear that many Iraqis killed in the first few days might have been spared had we known the extent of the collapse of the Iraqi defences. Brigadier Cordingley takes this in with a nod, but reminds his officers they have done what is required in a very uncertain and lethal situation. They discuss how to approach future encounters.

Brigadier Cordingley suggests that, in light of the apparent crumbling of resistance from the Iraqis, the lead troops should not fire unless fired upon and should approach Iraqi positions with the expectation of taking prisoners rather than killing them.

There is general agreement with this sentiment but some concern that it may place our soldiers at unnecessary risk. In the brief debate that follows, it is agreed that the advancing British forces will continue to ‘prepare’ enemy objectives in the normal manner, with artillery and direct fire from the tanks and other vehicles, but that during the assault the attacking force will halt just short and allow any Iraqis who wish to surrender to do so. This seems like a reasonable compromise to me, although it is inevitable that more Iraqis will die in the process of ‘preparation’.

The brigadier finishes by saying that 7th Brigade is likely to lead an advance to secure another objective, called Denver, with an expected kick-off of 1800 hours. The relevant staff officers present various details and we all take notes. Objective Denver is many kilometres to the northeast. The prospect of a night advance into such an uncertain situation is not particularly attractive, at least not to me.

On this note the meeting breaks up, and just as we are all beginning to move off, news comes in of yet another friendly fire incident, this time involving Egyptian tanks firing on vehicles in our logistic group. Two British vehicles have been destroyed and there are several casualties. As has been the case throughout this war, our allies are doing more damage than our enemy.

The remains of the afternoon slip by. I talk to my headquarters about the upcoming operation and am again told to stay with 7th Brigade. I am also told to be ready for another liaison mission, possibly again with the Americans. I hope the coordination will be better this time, but keep my thoughts to myself. My crew and I have a warm meal, our first for some

time, and several hot brews. I write up my journal, trying to capture the events of the previous night, but with my head nodding and my eyes scratchy, it’s a poor, sparse account. We sit and clean our weapons.

Shortly before 1800 hours I guide Pete into position for the night advance. I managed a short nap of twenty minutes during the afternoon, but feel no better for it. We line up with the other vehicles and are ready to go.

The final phase of the war awaits.

12

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

There is a delay, the radio informs us.

All around, armoured vehicles are arrayed in the gloom as we poise to advance. There is no explanation. We wait.

My crew is speculating on the possible cause—unexpected enemy action, perhaps, or some confusion with the Americans on our left flank—when word comes to stand down. The attack has been delayed until midnight. Pete cuts the engine and I tell the boys to get some rest while I try to get information from our headquarters. ‘The situation with the Iraqis is pretty unclear,’ I’m told. ‘There’s a chance we’ll still head for Objective Denver but no-one seems to know why there’s a delay.’

Steve suggests I get some sleep and I wedge myself under the rear of the wagon to avoid the rain. My mind keeps turning despite tiredness and I find it hard to sleep. Whenever I do, I am woken by vehicles moving in the dark nearby. I wriggle further under our wagon as one passes close by.

I’m soon startled awake by someone calling my name. ‘Major Cantwell,’ a soldier says in a northern English accent, ‘you’re needed at the operations vehicle, sir.’

I peer at my watch: just short of midnight, 2330 hours. I run my hands over my face, feeling the scratch of two days of stubble on my cheeks.

The division headquarters has sent through a new task, this time to the south, where an Egyptian tank division is moving along our right flank—

possibly the Egyptians who shot up our guys earlier. I am less than thrilled with this news.

‘Do you guys have an Arabic-speaker?’ I ask.

‘Yeah, he should be waiting outside,’ comes the reply. ‘He’ll travel in another wagon. You need to leave here by 0430 to arrive at the coordination point by first light.’

I locate the Brits who will join me and reluctantly wake the boys to marry-up with them. We are again pulling out our sleeping bags when I am summoned back to the operations vehicle to be told the job has just been cancelled.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ I say flatly, short-tempered with tiredness and contradictory orders. I am told that I’ll be called if anything else comes up. ‘Great,’ I mutter, and again walk back to our vehicle to snatch some sleep.

Soon I am shaken awake again. ‘What? What’s up?’ I say groggily to the man tugging at my shoulder.

‘Sir, you need to go!’ the soldier says. ‘The coordination job with the Egyptians is back on. The brigade is going to advance eastwards at first light. There’s talk of a ceasefire tomorrow!’

‘A ceasefire? Shit!’ I say, struggling to my feet and dragging open the door to prod Steve and Pete. ‘When do we leave?’

‘Right now, sir!’ At that moment the engine of the vehicle carrying the interpreter bursts into life. Looking up I can make out the shape of the vehicle commander, who bellows, ‘Come on!’

‘Fuck! We’re moving! Let’s go!’ I shout, throwing in my bunched sleeping bag. There is a burst of swearing and thumps as my crewmen react. I bang the door closed, race to the front of the vehicle and climb up and then down into my hatch. A moment later Pete’s head appears and, with a loud revving, the vehicle beside us starts moving. ‘For fuck’s sake!’ cries

Pete and he cranks our engine into life, crunching the gears. We are off before either of us has had a chance to pull on our helmets and headphones.

We dash after the other vehicle, which is rapidly disappearing into the darkness. Our intercom is rich with curses when we all finally get ourselves sorted. As we chase the other vehicle, I realise there's been no time to fire up the GPS, forcing me to rely on the navigation of the other crew commander. Not good, I think. I grab the bulky satellite receiver, bumping about in my hatch, torch between my teeth as I stab the buttons.

Looking up again I can't see the other vehicle. 'Pete!' I say urgently, 'have you got 'em?'

'No, boss, they just fucked off into the dark,' he replies.

'Just great,' I spit. In our haste we haven't even established radio communications with them. By now the brigade radio net has come alive as the force is briefed about the advance to the east. I consider asking for the frequency of the other vehicle but decide against it. I've got the right coordinates in the GPS now and the thing is working okay. 'Fuck 'em,' I say. 'We'll meet them there. Dickheads.'

We push on, passing through the last of the British tanks protecting the southern flank of the formation and then encounter some rolling ground, a slow rising and falling of the desert. After several kilometres it starts to feel like we are on a dark sea, riding slow swells. As we crest one of these low dunes, I stare ahead, seeing a black shape a few hundred metres ahead, thinking for a moment that we have caught up with our counterpart vehicle. I am about to say something when a shocking realisation hits me. It is an Iraqi tank. Another is not far behind it.

'Stop!' I shout over the intercom. 'Enemy tank! Reverse! Fucking reverse!'

I hear someone start to say, 'Wha …' but then we are braking hard, throwing me forward in the hatch. Pete has us in reverse and the

transmission whines as we scuttle back. My eyes are locked on the first tank, which even in the dark has the unmistakable flat rounded turret of a T-55, the standard Iraqi tank of Soviet origin. Someone is shouting over the intercom but I ignore it, repeating the order—‘Reverse! Reverse!’—while lunging for the machine gun, dragging back the cocking lever. We gather speed then hit some bumps, possibly our own tracks, and I am rattled about in the hatch. I swing the barrel in the direction of the Iraqi tanks.

The sound of the machine gun firing is loud in my ears over the roar of the engine. There are no tracer rounds in the ammunition belt so in the darkness I cannot see where the bullets strike. I squeeze the trigger again, this time bracing the gun more firmly against the movement of our vehicle. Another string of bullets races across the expanding gap between us and the Iraqi tank. At the back of my mind is the knowledge that this puny machine gun is completely useless against any tank, even an old T-55, but if the tank is manned—I have no idea whether it is or not—perhaps my fire might discourage the Iraqi commander and give us a few extra moments to escape before they shoot.

Suddenly we have reached the crest of the low ridge and are moving back down the far slope, still in reverse, engine roaring at full power. ‘Keep going!’ I shout. We plunge down the slight slope. ‘Halt!’ I shout as we reach the bottom of the shallow gully, ‘Advance!’ I command, using the standard one-word orders. This is no time for misunderstanding. Pete guns the engine again, this time in forward gear. ‘Hard left!’ I shout, and we turn quickly. I keep the machine gun trained in the direction of the tank for as long as possible as we scurry off into the darkness.

I duck down to read the grid reference on the GPS, which I scribble down in my notebook—it’s barely legible due to the vibrating vehicle and my shaking hand. We’ve run about a kilometre when I tell Pete to slow down and halt. There is no sign of a pursuit. I am breathing hard. Both Pete

and Steve start talking at once. Cutting through the babble, I ask Steve to check that we're still on the brigade command frequency. With this confirmed I key the microphone.

'Contact, tanks at grid …' I read off the six figures. 'Pointed east, possibly moving,' I broadcast. 'I've lost contact with the Echo call sign,' I add, referring to the other vehicle with the interpreter on board, 'but I plan to meet them at the coordination point.'

'Roger,' comes the reply. 'We'll send some tanks to investigate your contact.'

After gathering our wits for a few more minutes, we start moving again, this time making a wide arc around the Iraqi tanks to approach the rendezvous point from a different direction. My two lads talk incessantly for a time, easing their nerves. I join the chatter, still high from the exhilaration of fright. We reach our destination as the weak dawn light is greying the eastern horizon. The vehicle with the interpreter is waiting for us.

There is no sign of any Egyptians.

As I walk over to the other vehicle I suppress the urge to vent my anger at the crew's cowboy antics. 'Thanks for waiting for us,' is all I say. They look slightly abashed and one of them says, 'We heard you ran into some Iraqi tanks. That must have got your attention.'

'You could say that,' I reply flatly, still seething and keyed up. Suddenly, I hear a tank fire to our north. I tense involuntarily, as does everyone. A radio squawks in the back of their vehicle and we hear that British tanks have found the Iraqi tanks we encountered. Four T-55s have been destroyed. It seems they'd been abandoned. I don't feel the least bit sheepish about shooting at what turns out to be empty tanks. If they'd been manned there's every chance we'd be dead now.

Half an hour later there is still no sign of the Egyptians. By now the 7th Brigade is rolling eastwards again and I make a radio call to ask if we should rejoin them. After a pause this is agreed and both our vehicles start off in pursuit of the leading troops. Another fruitless coordination mission that might have got us killed, I think resentfully.

As the dash eastwards gathers pace, radio communications become increasingly difficult between 7th Brigade headquarters, which is on the move, and the division headquarters, which is falling further behind as we push towards the coast. I can hear both radio stations even though they can't hear each other and for a time I become a rebroadcasting station, receiving messages from the brigade headquarters then retransmitting them to the distant division staff. It is a busy time, rapidly transcribing reports of more and more abandoned Iraqi tanks and equipment. Our vehicle is also making good progress and soon we begin to catch up to the brigade. Among the last messages I pass on, before we too lose communications, is the welcome news that we can shed our chemical suits, although there is no chance to do it now as we continue at full speed. The other message of note is that all units should be on the lookout for any evidence of abandoned chemical weapons. We are also encouraged to search any significant Iraqi headquarters or installations for maps or other evidence of where nerve agents or other chemicals might be stored.

We have caught up with the leading combat troops and I advise the brigade headquarters that I will remain with them, having missed the command group in the race eastwards. The dickheads in the other vehicle have already peeled off to try to find the headquarters. I let them go.

The advance halts for a time when a minor road is encountered, the first we have seen for many days, littered with a dozen abandoned trucks and two Scud missile launchers. These are the missiles the Iraqis have been firing into Israel and Saudi Arabia, killing twenty-seven Americans and

wounding almost a hundred more in one strike that landed on a US military base in the kingdom. There is some excitement at this discovery, and a detachment of soldiers is left to guard the missiles as the formation regathers and then drives eastwards once more.

An attention-grabbing message is passed across the radio: there is to be a ceasefire. It is timed for 0800, an hour away. The brigade's mission is to seize the main highway running through northern Kuwait towards the Iraqi city of Basra. The lead squadrons of tanks and accompanying infantry are ordered to get there before the ceasefire. This news elicits a burst of comments over the intercom but none of the euphoria you might expect. We all know we've beaten the Iraqis. The powers-that-be just needed to find a way to end it.

A while later we briefly stop again as infantry teams dismount to check a bunker system. As we idle to a halt we draw abreast a long string of destroyed Iraqi tanks, all of them apparently hit by missiles from aircraft a day or so earlier. With a word to Pete and Steve I jump off our wagon and dash to the first tank, which is charred to a blackened hulk. Part of a human body lies on the sand nearby, burnt. I add this to the tally of dead in my mind. I think about the men around that destroyed truck. Was it yesterday? The day before? The days and the dead have blurred together. The next tank in the line is also burnt, but the front part and its turret are largely intact. I jump up onto the armour plate and climb onto the turret to peer inside. The interior is utterly smashed, wires and control boxes hanging from the walls and roof. A few grisly body parts are splayed about on the blackened metal floor. I am repelled by the stink and the sight and now wonder why I was drawn to look at all. Seeing it doesn't explain anything. I suppose I was curious to see at close quarters the damage a missile would do to a tank—now I know.

We are moving again and I jog back to our wagon.

Ahead, we find substantial Iraqi defences; the desert is scarred by bunkers, revetments and trenches. Large steel shipping containers have been used as makeshift dugouts, half-buried and covered by heaped sand. The debris of a fleeing army is everywhere. Military equipment of every description litters the trenches and the ground between them.

Smouldering piles of partly burnt ammunition, set on fire by the departing Iraqis, sit alongside strewn boxes, fuel cans, heaped timber planks, oil drums, broken generators, snaking cables, barbed wire and rubbish. The rumbling of our engine is occasionally obliterated by the slap of tank fire as yet another abandoned Iraqi vehicle is dispatched. Smoke boils from these and other burning vehicles but these dark pillars look insignificant compared to the heavy pall of smoke that wreaths the battlefield as we move eastwards. It is the smoke of hundreds of burning oilwells, vandalised and set on fire by the retreating Iraqis. The sky, already sombre with low cloud, is blackened with it. It emits an acrid stink, and when it rains the drops are a muddy grey.

We pass through an area of wrecked defences, then another belt of trenches and bunkers appears. In the process of picking our way through, we've drifted away from the nearest British vehicles but I am unconcerned by this. I tell Pete to make his way back towards the main group as we navigate through the tangled Iraqi defences. Then I see a much larger bunker complex, comprised of several buried shipping containers with a cluster of tall antennas nearby. Trenches and smaller bunkers radiate out from the central structure and it is clear that this is a headquarters, a big one. I look around to see if any of our infantry is nearby but see only a small group of Warrior fighting vehicles halted several hundred metres away, busy with another bunker.

'I think we should take a look at this big bunker,' I say over the intercom.

‘You’re mad, boss,’ says Pete. He’s not keen. Steve says nothing.

‘You heard the message about checking for information on chemical weapons,’ I say. ‘Pull up there near that entrance.’ I guide Pete towards a sloped pathway leading down to an open door in the end of one of the buried cargo containers. ‘Steve, come up here and man the gun, mate.’ I reach for a rifle before climbing out to jump down as we come to a halt.

On the ground I begin to regret my decision immediately, but press on down the sandy ramp to the darkened doorway ahead and then freeze for a moment: what about booby traps? I see there are dozens of overlapped boot prints and this gives me some confidence that the entrance ramp at least is safe.

Stepping gingerly forwards, I scan for any suspicious wires or signs of a trap. Nothing. I lean in through the door; the bunker is illuminated by light spilling in through the entrance. The floor is covered by a dirty carpet, on which sit several wooden desks, a line of metal filing cabinets and some folding chairs. Paper, empty tins and other rubbish is scattered in the corners. I step carefully through the doorway, rifle at the ready. Three or four kerosene lamps sit on the desks, along with a few dog-eared cardboard folders, which I flip open to reveal pages covered with spidery Arabic script and what looks like lists and tables of figures. A field telephone, the black plastic handset sitting discarded beside its green cradle, also sits on one of the desks.

I’ve already pulled open the first filing cabinet drawer before I remember the risk of booby traps and again I freeze for a moment. Nothing happens. I riffle through the files inside, which seem to be more reports and forms. Even if there is information about chemical weapons among all these reports, there’s no way I’ll recognise it. I walk to the other end of the space, where a camp bed lies tipped over beside another doorway, this one apparently leading to another smaller room. As my eyes

adjust I see a large framed picture of Saddam Hussein hanging on a wall. Perfect! I've found my war trophy. I take it down and am placing it on a desk near the entrance when I am startled by noises from somewhere beyond the next room. I snap the rifle up to my shoulder, heart pounding.

After a moment there is more noise. It's the sound of a male voice, muffled; even so I can tell he's not speaking English. There is a thump, like something has been struck or dropped, then the noise stops. There are others, at least two people, in the bunker complex. I walk forward slowly, the rifle barrel out in front of me, towards the other doorway. I can hear my heart in my chest. The dim room beyond is stacked high with cardboard boxes along one side. Another doorway is at the other end, through which light is streaming. I step slowly towards it, peering along my rifle to see that it is a tunnel-like passageway, a trench about a metre wide and 10 metres long, covered by a rough timber roof. At places along its length there are crude 'windows' where the sand has been dug away to let in some light. It is partly blocked at one point where one of the walls has collapsed. I can see another room of some sort at the end of the passageway. There is a distant bumping noise, then silence again.

When I reach the end of the tunnel I sweep the interior with the rifle, seeing no-one in what appears to be some sort of armoury. Dozens of wooden weapon boxes are stacked along both sides of the room. On the shelving at the far end is a mess of radios, binoculars, kerosene lanterns, small boxes and assorted odds and ends. Several RPG tubes, the launchers for rocket-propelled grenades, lie on the floor near half a dozen AK-47 assault rifles. Another doorway, this one covered by a grey blanket nailed to the lintel, leads to a further chamber. I decide I've pushed my luck far enough. I have no idea where the Iraqis who made the noise have gone. Perhaps they climbed out where the wall of the passageway had collapsed,

but it seems more likely they've retreated further into the bunker. Good luck to them, I think, they can stay there.

Before heading back out, I open the lid on one of the weapon boxes to see neatly housed rifles, clean and apparently well maintained. I am lifting one out when I hear Steve's voice, faint but clear, calling me. I yell that I'm okay and I hear both the boys' voices now, asking where I am. I realise they're walking along outside the buried containers and trenches, looking for me. Moving back into the passage, I shout again up through one of the gaps near the roof and I see Pete, then Steve.

'What the fuck are you doing, boss?' asks Pete. I can tell he's relieved but angry. 'You need to get out of there. The others are leaving!'

'Be careful,' I caution them, 'I think I heard some voices speaking Arabic in the tunnel between the bunkers.'

'Christ, boss,' says Steve, 'let's get out of here.'

'Okay, just a sec,' I say. 'I've found some AK-47s and RPGs and other shit in here. Wait there.'

I duck back into the armoury and pull out three rifles and several boxes of ammunition. 'Here, grab these,' I say when I'm back in the passageway, passing the weapons and other items out to them. 'I'll meet you back at the vehicle.' Then I turn to walk quickly back through the complex, retrieving the portrait of Saddam on the way.

We stow the Iraqi weapons and Saddam's portrait on board. I note down the GPS coordinates of the complex so that someone else can look through the documents it contains. As we are about to climb back on board I hear a sudden shout from one of the boys and see Pete pointing at something off to the side, in the direction of the bunkers. Three Iraqi soldiers are emerging from a trench about a hundred metres away. Two of them are carrying AK-47s.

I am still holding my rifle and I pull it up to my shoulder, ready to shoot. They see us and start to run, angling across my front. I take careful aim at the first man then pause. One of them is staggering as he tries to run. The others glance fearfully at us.

I make a decision that I'll never regret. I swing the muzzle slightly off to the right, ahead of the shuffling men and fire three quick shots into the sand. They freeze, one of them running into the back of another. Their rifles are tossed aside and they fling up their arms. One of them drops to his knees, wailing in fear.

'Steve!' I shout. 'Cover them. Hurry!' He makes a dive for the side of the vehicle and is up to the gun in a few seconds. 'Pete,' I add, 'I'm going over there. Follow me in the wagon. Make sure Steve has a clear shot at these bastards, okay?'

'All right,' he replies, his voice tight with excitement.

I walk quickly over to the three Iraqis, who have all now gone to their knees. They start pleading with me before I reach them. One of them is speaking in poor English: 'Not to shoot! Not to shoot!' he pleads. The soldier in the middle, the one who had staggered, is clearly wounded. He has an ugly undressed wound on the side of his head, from which blood has soaked the shoulder and arm of his jacket. His face is filthy but the fear is stark on his features. The other Iraqi looks like a boy. His face is a mask of terror. He is crying out in Arabic, but begging needs no translation.

Pete has the vehicle parked a short distance away and I glance up to see Steve hunched behind the gun. Both look uncertain. 'Pete! Get down here! Search 'em!' I call out, which produces another wail from the cringing Iraqis. A hasty search reveals nothing of danger; a prayer book, some beads, a couple of battered wallets, a clotted handkerchief, a pencil. I indicate that they can lower their arms. They quieten a little but a sob escapes from the

boy from time to time. They watch us like beaten dogs, ready for the next blow.

We secure their weapons then I tell Pete to get some bread and a bottle of water. Steve continues to cover them. Pete tears open the sealed plastic bag of bread and hands it to the oldest Iraqi. He is uncertain at first then hunger overcomes him as he takes several huge bites of the dense bread. The boy does likewise but the wounded man eats only a little. The water bottle is emptied in a few moments and Pete gets another one out. I open one of our simple first-aid kits and hand a square bandage and a roll of gauze to the older man, using my hands to mime wrapping it around my head then pointing to the wounded soldier. He makes a clumsy attempt at wiping the man's wound, which brings a gasp of pain, before wrapping the gauze about his head.

'What are we going to do with them, sir?' asks Steve. 'We can't leave that wounded guy here, can we?'

'No, I think we'll need to take them with us,' I say after a moment's thought. 'We'll stick them up on top and you can cover them with your pistol while we're driving. There's room up there if we squeeze them together.'

After a bit of confusion we manage to get the three Iraqis up onto our wagon and arrange them in a tight huddle. In the process the older man speaks a few more words to me. In broken English he explains he is a teacher, not a soldier. He is sixty-two years old. The army, I decipher, came to his school and took him and all the boys. He points to the boy—apparently one of his students—and curses Saddam Hussein. I indicate the wounded man, saying, 'Also student?'

The elderly teacher shakes his head. 'Soldier.'

I look at the grubby-faced boy and the old man. Jesus, I think, kids and kidnapped teachers.

Then we are off again, with Steve squatting beside me on the engine deck with a pistol trained on our frightened prisoners.

We head east towards the Basra road. It is almost eight o’clock. The war is about to end.

13

WAR'S END

The final leg of our advance is a journey into ruin.
With each passing kilometre the density and variety of Iraqi military equipment and defensive positions increase, until we are driving through a landscape so littered with debris it is impossible to drive in a straight line. Smoke rises from the wrecks of burning vehicles, tugged away by a chill wind. Leaden skies, infused with black smoke from burning oilfields, cast a sullen light over this utterly depressing scene.

I catch sight of British armoured vehicles off to a flank and among them is a medical vehicle with its distinctive red cross. I flag down the armoured ambulance and we unload our captives. Even though the wounded soldier is assisted by two British medics, he collapses onto the sand. Soldiers from other vehicles arrive and I convince them to take the other two prisoners. The British soldiers look on, perplexed, as the Iraqis seize my hands. They shake them vigorously then begin kissing my knuckles as I try to draw away. As they are led off, the older man holds the hand of the boy. I wonder what will become of them and when they will see their families again. I am relieved I didn't shoot.

Finally we come up to the main Kuwait–Basra road. The immense scale of destruction confounds my senses. Steve is perched up next to me and the three of us silently take it all in. Occasionally there is an especially remarkable sight, but no-one speaks, we just gaze and shake our heads. The

air force has pursued the Iraqis attempting to flee Kuwait and the results of their deadly efficiency are all around us. It is a slaughter.

Iraqi tanks, some broken and smouldering, others apparently intact, are scattered among hundreds of other cast-off or destroyed bits of equipment. Artillery pieces stand abandoned, barrels pointing skywards or angled impotently to the ground beside piles of shells. There are anti-aircraft guns, trucks of every size and description, armoured personnel carriers, and Russian-made jeeps, all destroyed or abandoned. The array of tan-painted military vehicles is interspersed in many places by bright coloured civilian cars and pickup trucks, stolen from Kuwait when the exodus began. Many have been bogged in the sand or trapped by trenches, their metal skins pierced by shrapnel. Doors hang open to reveal the bodies inside. Suitcases are everywhere, many spilled open to reveal looted clothes, toasters, jugs or crockery. Bed sheets, blankets and woven rugs carpet the desert.

Among all this are hundreds of dead Iraqis, their bodies torn and their limbs spread and protruding at impossible angles. Bomb craters dot the sand, surrounded by shredded metal and shrapnel.

We'd seen Hell from afar; here it is, up close.

Crossing the wreckage of the highway I recognise vehicles of 7th Brigade headquarters and we join them as they occupy a vacant Iraqi defensive position, an area of sand bulldozed into a rough square berm 100 metres across. Pete cuts the engine and we sit in silence for a few moments. I look at my two crewmen. I can see in their faces the same revulsion I feel about the brutality we've seen. Their youth has somehow been drained.

'We made it, boys,' I say finally, at a loss for anything profound. 'We made it.' I firmly shake the hands of both men.

'Yeah,' says Steve, surveying the carnage. 'Thank Christ.'

After a few minutes we dismount. I trudge over to the brigade headquarters to hear there is no clear plan, except to hold this section of the

highway. Back at our wagon I am handed a cup of tea, scalding hot and full of sugar. I have never tasted a drink so good.

Together we attend to our vehicle, checking the oil, testing the tracks and sorting the items thrown into storage bins in haste over the last few days. I retrieve my portrait of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi AK-47s and we have our picture taken together by a British soldier. I see the photo months later. I'm smiling, grubby, with a weary, whiskered face. Steve, beside me, is drawn and serious as always, and Pete's young features are greyed by the strain of the previous four days.

The lads stretch out in the back of the wagon to rest, but I am not yet ready to sleep despite the brain-fogging tiredness. I take a rifle and walk back to the Basra highway, still careful to tread only in fresh tracks. I encounter an infantry platoon and walk with them, helping to pick through the wreckage in search of wounded Iraqis. We find only a few; the rest have either been taken away by their comrades or they've died from their wounds. We discover one poor wretch whose legs are riddled by shrapnel. He has bled profusely and the tattered remains of his trousers are black with blood. He has dragged himself a dozen metres or more across the sand, leaving a dark trail behind him. He is barely alive. One of the British soldiers administers a shot of morphine while a vehicle is summoned to take him away.

As we continue to move along, small, odd sights are revealed. Among several blackened and smouldering Iraqi tanks I discover a pristine tank with its engine still running, its crew long gone. Elsewhere, lying scattered on the sand next to the charred remains of an Iraqi soldier, are a dozen bottles of expensive-looking perfume including several enormous bottles of Chanel No. 5. One of the bottles has shattered and the distinctive, flowery scent of the perfume mingled with the stench of the incinerated man lying

beside it turns my stomach. I don’t know it yet, but for years to come the smell of this French perfume will evoke instant revulsion.

Beside a mangled truck I find another dead Iraqi, laid out with great care by one of his departed friends, his hands folded neatly on his chest where a photograph of his family has been placed in his fingers.

Suddenly a shot rings out, followed by several more and we all duck for cover. An Iraqi is holed up in one of the many bunkers dug into the surrounding desert. The British soldiers attempt to coax him out but the desperate Iraqi fires again. A grenade is tossed through the entrance, followed by a bang then silence. The dead man is dragged out into the light, his eyes staring and his face and hands covered with shrapnel punctures seeping bright blood.

When night falls the darkness outside our temporary compound is dotted with small fires still flickering here and there in the wreckage, but it is the glow from the burning Kuwaiti oilfields that captures all our attention. The horizon to the north and northwest pulses with the light of hundreds of flaming oil rigs set ablaze in a final act of defiance and petulance by the retreating Iraqi Army. The wind has shifted to bring the pungent oily smoke in our direction, and we wrap our army-issue *shemaghs* —cotton scarves—across our faces as we take in the light show.

I can no longer fight the need for sleep. I pull off my boots for the first time in more than four days and squirm into my sleeping bag beneath the canvas lean-to that Pete has erected against the side of our wagon. The waves of tiredness beating against my mind make me so clumsy I can barely work the zipper. I think of Jane and our boys, wishing there was some way to let them know I am safe, but then I fall asleep so rapidly and deeply that it is like falling off a cliff.

Despite my bone-deep fatigue I open my eyes only a few hours later, jolted awake by a vivid dream of being hunted by Apache helicopters and

being trapped in our vehicle. Irrational fear courses through me and for a moment I hover half in and half out of the dream, breathing fast and shallow. Then I remember I'm no longer out in some cold empty patch of desert like a sitting duck. I calm my breathing. I fall back to sleep.

Again I awake with a start. This time someone is shaking me.

'Huh?' I mumble, groggy with sleep.

'Sir, you're wanted in the headquarters.'

I pull myself free of the sleeping bag. I feel like I've been drugged with horse tranquillisers. It's 0200 hours.

A few minutes later I'm in the 7th Brigade headquarters, bleary-eyed but mostly awake, to be told that I must man another coordination point, this time on the Basra road close to the Kuwait–Iraq border. There are to be some sort of surrender talks with the Iraqis at a nearby airbase called Safwan and I'm to meet up with an American team to help coordinate the movement of Coalition vehicles and personnel to the site. I note down the coordinates and the time for the rendezvous, 0900 hours.

As dawn breaks we are on the move again. It is the first day of March. I decide to detour via the division headquarters and my crew is rewarded with a bundle of mail. For a moment I am transported home as I read letters from Jane and my boys, David and Daniel. I feel such a surge of yearning for them. I glance sheepishly at Steve and Pete to see that receiving news from home has been equally emotional for them.

We arrive at the designated spot ahead of time and put on hot water for a brew and a shave. I am scraping away several days of growth when, to my amazement, a small convoy of Americans arrives. Bugger me, finally someone has turned up as arranged.

We set up our joint checkpoint beside the two-lane highway. There are Iraqi trenches and bunkers on either side of the road, littered with the familiar collection of cast-off weapons, munitions and military debris. A

short distance away, across the road, stands a rundown hut and a well that appears to hold murky water.

Around mid-morning we spot a small group of civilians walking southwards down the road. They turn out to be Kuwaitis, who tell us they were taken hostage several days ago, when the Iraqis started leaving. In broken English we hear stories of imprisonment and abuse by the Iraqis. They beg for water and food. We have only a little but we offer what we can. The first group is still in sight, heading towards Kuwait City, when more civilians come into view, also walking south.

The steady trickle of refugees grows throughout the day. Some stop to rest at the old hut and well before continuing. We walk among them, handing what little water and food we can spare. It is received with enormous gratitude. My requests back to the division headquarters to find some trucks and emergency supplies are refused on the basis that all our trucks are busy and we want to avoid getting stuck with the burden of humanitarian relief. I argue for a time but in the end get a firm rebuttal. ‘Just man the checkpoint and facilitate the movement of military groups heading for Safwan airfield,’ I am ordered.

Late in the day an American combat engineer team arrives, telling me they are going to start destroying any undamaged Iraqi vehicles and equipment along the highway. Soon afterwards the first blast rends the air as an armoured personnel carrier abandoned a few hundred metres away is blown to pieces by a large demolition charge. One of the engineers who had been checking the nearby hut and well comes hurrying back to tell me there is almost certainly a large quantity of mustard gas shells in the well, probably dumped there by Iraqis with no wish to transport them or be caught with chemical weapons. Pointing to his chemical metering device he says, in a southern accent as wide as the Mississippi, ‘It’s a goddamned chemical soup in that well, suh.’

Shit, I think, it's only a couple of hundred metres away. 'Are we okay here?' I ask.

'So long as you don't go near the well,' he replies. I had leaned far over the well to look into its depths that morning. I can't see or feel anything wrong with the skin on my face and hands but resolve to wash as soon as possible. I warn our soldiers and tell them to keep civilians away from the well.

The demolition crew has worked its way towards us and has begun piling Iraqi weapons and munitions into a large heap. Steve, Pete and I assist in gathering rocket-propelled grenades, mortar bombs, hand grenades, ammunition and weapons, dumping them on the pile, which is now a couple of metres high. The boys retreat to our wagon while I stand over the engineers watching them set explosives at the base of the pile and rig the fuses. One of the Americans then calmly says 'Fire on,' and the team walks away towards the road.

Suddenly realising the fuse has been lit and just how short it is, I bolt back towards our vehicle as the engineers jump into their Humvee and roar off down the road. I have barely ducked around the side of our wagon when the load goes up in a deafening explosion. Bits of weapons and whole grenades that haven't detonated in the explosion fly past. A piece of steel clangs into a Humvee parked beside us and I hear an American soldier, one of our checkpoint team, yelp with pain as it ricochets into his forearm, opening a gash. There are several accompanying bangs as rocket-propelled grenades, also thrown into the air intact, fall nose down to detonate on the road and packed sand around us.

'Fucking idiots!' I hear one of the Americans shout. The storm ends as quickly as it began and we pick ourselves up, cursing the engineers. Undeterred, their vehicle stops again a little further down the road and soon

another abandoned Iraqi tank explodes with a loud thump. Engineers just love blowing stuff up.

Everyone seems a little unhinged—fatigue, the destruction around us and the Armageddon-like belching black smoke of the nearby oil fires are taking their toll. Soon afterwards three British armoured vehicles roar past, the crews casually tossing grenades as they drive along. They disappear towards Kuwait City, dispensing their explosives like firecrackers. Normal operating procedures have definitely been suspended.

By the following day we have dealt with several Coalition convoys heading to the Safwan ceremony where the commanding general, Norman Schwarzkopf, will preside over the formal Iraqi acceptance of their defeat. The event will occur the next morning, 3 March. There is no elation among the soldiers with me, only relief that this short, brutal war will be officially over. I celebrate by having a wash for the first time in eight days. I strip off to sit in a yellow plastic bowl with a few centimetres of water in it, much to the amusement of our American friends. It is hardly a thorough cleansing but it feels wonderful.

At one point there is a great commotion when news is received that a large Iraqi armoured force has attempted to break out of northern Kuwait, where it had been contained. We receive orders to be ready for a hasty departure and are on edge as the radio reports come in. The Americans respond to the breakout with punishing force, ordering a large contingent of Apache helicopters to attack the Iraqis. I watch the gaggle of ugly aircraft sweep overhead, their winglets heavy with missiles. A sound like thunder rolls back over the desert and we see black smoke rise in the already polluted sky. The Apaches clatter overhead again, heading south, their missile racks empty. The Americans with us cheer and holler. More than eighty tanks and dozens of armoured personnel carriers are destroyed. Three and a half thousand Iraqis who escaped the carnage are rounded up.

One of the Americans in our group asks, ‘Surely those Eye-raqis knew about the ceasefire?’

One of his buddies says, ‘They’re just dumb fucks, man.’

Another chimes in: ‘Nah, they’re just dead fucks now, man.’

Late that afternoon I receive a radio message ordering me to return to division headquarters, now located just outside Kuwait City. We wish our American counterparts good luck then head south, replicating our previous journey through the destruction. At one point the road is so jammed with smashed and smouldering vehicles that we are forced to bypass over the desert while British engineers work to force a pathway through the ugly mess. As we crest a rise the city spreads out before us with its high-rise buildings and towers in the middle of sprawling suburbs. On one side a large power plant is burning and in several places oil facilities are also ablaze. Arab soldiers, Saudis and Kuwaitis, are picking through the debris on the roads, souveniring whatever takes their fancy from the haul of items stolen by the fleeing Iraqis.

I eventually find the way to our headquarters, which has been set up in an untidy palm plantation. As we pull into position there is a loud bang and a grinding noise from the engine of our wagon, which shudders to a stop. ‘That doesn’t sound too good,’ says Pete. A little while later a mechanic arrives and officially pronounces the engine to be completely ‘fucked’. My crew and I stand in front of our immobilised vehicle, feeling strangely affectionate towards this trusty wagon, which has brought us through so much without missing a beat, only to croak when hostilities are all but over. The old girl has great timing.

The next day we are told of the surrender deal with the Iraqis, who have renounced all claims on Kuwait and agreed to a complete ceasefire. There is no cheering, just a sense of satisfaction before people get back to work on the thousands of requests and problems now swamping the headquarters.

Over the following days I find myself helping to run the operations team in the division headquarters. Our main focus is cleaning up the battlefield. Mass burials are arranged; vast quantities of captured equipment are collected, sorted and earmarked either for return to the United Kingdom or for destruction. Armed factions have begun to emerge in Kuwait City: resistance fighters, Ba'athists, Shi'a militias and even Palestinians. Street clashes and some killings have begun but we stay out of it. Looting is commonplace. At night, tracer bullets from celebratory gunfire stitch patterns across the sky. Small numbers of Coalition soldiers continue to be killed and wounded, victims of unseen mines, careless weapon handling, curiosity with unexploded ordnance, even some chemical weapons. British troops have taken more than 7,000 prisoners; the Coalition total is a staggering 63,000.

A couple of days after the ceasefire the former headquarters of a senior Iraqi commander in Kuwait is discovered in our sector. I am ordered to take a party to investigate. Our convoy of Land Rovers snakes through a maze of partly blocked roads to where we are to rendezvous with members of the Kuwaiti Army and some resistance fighters. After several false starts we meet the Kuwaitis and are led to a wealthy suburb. We stop in front of a mansion, said to belong to a Kuwaiti prince. The house has been partly burnt and badly vandalised, but the thick bundles of cables leading from several windows and the thicket of radio masts in the garden mark it as an abandoned headquarters.

We enter cautiously, checking for booby traps. It smells like a sewer and evidence of a hasty departure is everywhere. Cupboards have been emptied, and crockery, clothing and knick-knacks litter the carpeted floors. Most of the rooms have been converted to offices with desks and dozens of filing cabinets stuffed with papers. Plastic-covered maps are stuck to the walls, plastered with grease-pencil markings and notations. Downstairs we

find a huge room, perhaps an entertainment area before the arrival of the Iraqis, in which a vast sand map of Kuwait has been constructed. It is perhaps 15 metres across and incredibly detailed, with coloured ribbons marking the roads, cardboard labels and small houses built from Lego bricks to indicate urban areas and towns. Markers showing military units dot the model, indicating Iraqi units and even a few Coalition formations near the border. Large red arrows sit on part of the model that is painted blue to represent the Arabian Gulf, showing the expected direction of a Coalition amphibious assault that never came.

Among the scores of unit markers, one of the intelligence officers spots the symbols for chemical weapons and these become the focus of the spooks' attention. Radio calls are made, requesting more personnel to secure the sand model and its bounty of information.

I walk upstairs with another officer. Huge piles of shit sit in every corner, while the carpets are urine-soaked and fly-blown. The stench is overpowering. On the upper floor we find a bedroom. The bed is a cheap iron-framed variety with metal springs. There is no mattress. Tools sit on a side table, including pliers, several hammers, an electric drill, lengths of wire and pieces of wood.

I suddenly understand what I am looking at. This is a torture chamber. Dried blood and human faeces stain the floor under the bed and are clogged in the wire base. The tools on the table are blood-smeared, stained black, brown and dull red. Ropes hang from the bed frame. The walls are caked with filth and blood.

A chill passes through me at the thought of the screams that must have echoed in this room. I am assailed by a powerful presence of evil and I back slowly out. My British colleague is pale as we stand outside the room. 'We need to get photographers and the military police here,' I say, 'and maybe a lawyer.' The room is a war crime scene. He nods and heads back down the

stairs to find the radio operator. I follow closely behind him, keen to get away.

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A day later I manage to arrange a call back to Australia through a bewildering series of communication links. I sit in a stinking Iraqi bunker with the handset of a radio clamped to my ear, listening to different radio operators along the chain of calls answering and connecting me onwards. A British warship somewhere in the Gulf is part of the extended call and they patch me into a satellite link back to London, where, suddenly, a female switchboard operator asks me, in a heartwarming Cockney accent, ‘Who do you wish to call, dear?’

I blurt out Jane’s telephone number in Australia and after a series of bleeps and buzzes I hear the ringing tone.

‘Hello, Jane speaking.’ For a moment I am struck dumb, then I tell her it’s me. At first she seems to think it is some sort of prank call and we are tripped up by the delay as our words are bounced through half a dozen communication systems around the world. Then she realises who it is and we are both talking at once, further confusing the conversation.

Eventually I am able to assure her I am safe and she cries with relief. I feel like joining her. I tell her that I’m in Kuwait and that I will be here for at least a month. She tells me about our boys and my throat tightens again. We are obliged to use radio protocols: ‘I love you, over!’, ‘I love you too, darling, over!’

When the connection is broken, the London operator comes back on the line to ask, ‘How will you be paying for your call, sir?’ I sit dumbfounded for a moment, crouched in a filthy hole in the sand with rain dripping

through the broken roof, then pull my wallet from a pocket of my grubby combat uniform. I pay by credit card.

A week after the ceasefire, I am told I will fly to another British headquarters on the coast of Saudi Arabia, where I had first landed in December of last year. My new job will be helping to coordinate the return of troops to Germany and the UK.

The day before I am scheduled to leave, I am sent on a final task. I accompany an engineer officer to reconnoitre the coast, just south of the Iraqi border where it's believed the Iraqis have built major minefields and beach defences. We travel in a decrepit Land Rover that has been liberated from the Iraqis. With the engineer driving and me navigating, we eventually arrive in a vast area of minefields and other barriers, stretching for kilometres along the coast. Neatly marked lanes cut through the deadly swathes of sand, where the wind has exposed thousands upon thousands of mines. My colleague takes careful notes of the dimensions and locations of the minefields, trenches and barbed-wire obstacles as I read off the coordinates on the GPS.

After several hours we call it quits, deciding to cut across the open desert behind the last of the minefields to intercept the highway. We have just begun to accelerate over the sand when *bang!* Beneath the Land Rover there is an explosion. My offsider slams on the brakes and we sit motionless for several seconds before he says, 'We might have just run over a mine.'

Craning around, I see nothing at first but then spot a line of disturbed sand running away on each side of us, just behind our vehicle. I point this out to my colleague who climbs over the seat into the rear of the Land Rover. 'Bloody hell!' he announces a moment or two later. 'It looks like a line of bar mines!' Bar mines are British-designed anti-tank mines shaped like a rectangular fence post, a little over a metre in length. They are buried in long lines by a plough that cuts a shallow trench. They are quick to lay

and contain a tank-killing explosive charge. Like so many other nations, Britain sold this technology to the Iraqis before the war.

My engineer friend leans as far as he can out the back of the Land Rover, peering at the sand behind us, then clambers back into the driving seat. ‘I think the fucking thing misfired!’ he breathes. ‘There’s an initiator charge across the top of the mines that sets off the main charge, but it looks like even that didn’t go off properly.’ The magnitude of what he is saying is chilling—had it worked properly it would have blown us into very small pieces.

‘Could it have got wet or something?’ I ask.

‘Don’t know, don’t care,’ he says. ‘Let’s just get the fuck out of here.’

We roll slowly forward, both of us leaning out the windows looking for ploughed sand that would reveal more bar mines. We see none but continue to crawl forward until we reach the sealed road. We stop on the road facing south for a minute, gathering our wits. ‘I’m due to fly out of here tomorrow,’ I tell my colleague, ‘and we almost got blown to bits back there.’ I expel a deep breath. ‘Fuck me, this place is determined to knock me off before I leave.’ He shakes his head then shoves the ageing Land Rover into gear and we drive south. The tightness in my guts lasts all the way back to our headquarters.

Early next morning I stand with Steve and Pete next to our wagon, which is still awaiting a new engine. My gear is piled beside me and we’ve said our farewells but I’m reluctant to go. I’ve told them both how proud I am of what they’ve done and how I admired their courage in so many terrifying moments. We’ve laughed a little, with the black humour so typical of soldiers. I feel emotional and fear I’ll make a fool of myself, but on an impulse I step forward and hug them both. ‘Thanks, I won’t forget what we’ve been through together,’ I say.

‘See ya, boss,’ says Pete.

Steve adds, ‘Take care, sir, and thanks.’

We shake hands one last time and then I struggle into my webbing and swing my bulging pack onto my back. I lift my duffle bag, made heavier by two pool-room souvenir AK-47s. I smile a final goodbye and trudge off towards a helicopter zone in an empty patch of desert nearby.

A short time later my gear and I are strapped into the rear of a British helicopter. The crew leaves the doors open as we lift off in a cloud of sand and make a slow orbit around the division headquarters. As we straighten to head for Kuwait airport, where I’ll meet a south-bound transport plane, I pick out the weedy patch of stunted palms where our wagon sits parked. Next to it stand Steve and Pete. One of them raises a hand in farewell, then they are obscured beneath the belly of the helicopter.

It will be weeks before I finally head home to Australia, but my war is over.

I don’t yet know it but another war, a war within, is about to begin.

14

A PRIVATE WAR BEGINS

I am home in Australia but my unruly mind is not. In the dream, I'm back in Iraq.

I stand again on the damp sand of the breach area where American troops are storming the Iraqi defensive line. I feel the cold wind, smell the pungent smoke of the burning vehicles, hear the thumps and cracks of battle. There are soldiers nearby, Americans, but I cannot see them. All I see is the bulldozed trench to my front, the trench where Iraqi soldiers were buried alive. A human hand reaches up from the churned sand.

The hand mesmerises me, compelling me forward. I feel the drag of my cumbersome chemical boots as I step unwillingly towards it. I know there are mines that could turn my legs into stumps, but I ignore the threat. All I see is the hand. I trudge onwards.

Dread wells up inside me. I draw nearer with each hesitant step. I see the dirt under the fingernails of the hand and the grime in the creases of the skin. I'm drawn downwards, forced onto my knees. The hand is within reach. I am powerless to stop myself reaching out. Dread becomes fear. I struggle to pull back. I heave backwards but am held fast. I strain and strain but my arm still reaches out. The dead hand jerks into life, snatching my hand in a vice-like grasp. My fear becomes terror. I buck, trying to free myself from its grip. It pulls me forward violently, sprawling me face down. The sand shifts and the earth opens up. I am pulled even harder and the sand starts to close in around me. I try to cry out, but no words come. I

writhe in panic, thrashing, gasping for air. I am almost buried! The sand has almost covered me! I convulse in horror. With one last effort I fight to shout, and in the final moments before the sand closes over, I force out a hoarse cry.

In an instant, I am awake. My shout has jolted me from the nightmare, but its pall is still on me. In the darkness of our bedroom my arms are outflung and I flail at the bedclothes. My breathing comes in great gulps. My heart hammers so hard in my chest that I feel it will burst. I bolt upright, staring wildly.

'John!' I hear. 'John! It's okay! You're having a bad dream!' Jane snaps on the bedside light. She's pale with worry and reaches over to gently rub my shoulder. 'It's all right, darling,' she says, 'I'm here. You're okay.'

My breathing is ragged, my pulse is racing and I'm clammy with sweat. Terror still courses through me and for several long moments I struggle to regain reason, to make myself understand it was just a dream, that I'm safe.

It is the third night in a row this has happened, although the nightmare is different each time. The disturbed dreams that began during my final weeks in the Middle East have followed me home. Some nights I sleep through, aware when I wake that I have dreamt about the war, albeit in ways that are more troubling than terrifying. But when the nightmares come it's different. I toss and moan in my sleep, racked by twisted memories in which I am trapped in a bunker, or hunted by helicopters, or maimed by a mine. I stare into the face of a decapitated head then lift it in my hand, or feel my guts cramping with fear as I roll towards British tanks in the dark. Afterwards, I struggle to get back to sleep. My mind is fully alert, tossing up memories in rapid succession, playing snatches of conversation, re-running events.

In the morning I rue my ability to remember my dreams in detail, a faculty I have always possessed and which seemed harmless before. Now

this aptitude is a curse, recalling the bizarre scenes and experiences of the nightmare while I shave and shower, eat breakfast and begin the day.

With my post-deployment leave finished, I am back at work, teaching armoured vehicle tactics to officers and soldiers at a training centre in country Victoria. Each day I shake off the previous night's horrors and present myself for duty. The work is stimulating and I enjoy the comradeship of my fellow instructors, but the sheer normality of life seems wrong. Paperwork is processed and filed, supplies are stacked and counted, soldiers line up to be ticked off a roll before starting work for the day. Supervisors fuss and worry over small details, energy is expended on petty problems. Stern memos are circulated. The very blandness of such activity should be comforting to me, reassuring me that the life I have known goes on, that the compressed period of violence and fear I experienced was an aberration. But it is not. Instead, I feel like I am watching all this from afar, a detached observer. I struggle to stay engaged, to mask my impatience with issues that seem inconsequential, to appear normal.

I suffer unexpected flashbacks.

Talking to a group of soldiers, explaining tactics, I glance at the armoured vehicle parked beside us and suddenly I see Steve and Pete struggling to brace an antenna against the side of another vehicle, in the dark Iraqi desert, with artillery falling close by. The image is a fantasy but the fear is real. The image flickers out as quickly as it has appeared, but for long seconds I am left with the surge of adrenaline, the expectation of disaster. Finally, I compose myself, focus, and turn to speak again to the young soldiers.

Sitting up on the turret of a tank, while a trainee crew commander attempts to navigate us across the training area at night, I watch as we drift further and further off our intended direction until we are heading west instead of north. I tell him to stop then show him the trick I'd used in Iraq to

get a rough compass bearing, demonstrating how to hold a clear plastic compass above my head away from the steel and electronics. I peer up to look at the glowing needle and am abruptly transported back to our failed rendezvous with the Americans. I hear the rumbling of US artillery heading in our direction. I am infused with the same tension and worry for the lives of my two British crewmen that had burned in my chest that night. I am frozen, unaware of my surroundings and the trainee at my shoulder.

Eventually he says, ‘Sir? Are you all right?’ and I snap back to the present. I swallow the bile in my throat, grateful for the darkness.

I am unexpectedly gripped by bouts of anxiety and alarm. My eyes flick about, expecting to glimpse a threat when nothing is there. In a crowded shopping mall I suddenly feel trapped, vulnerable, waiting to be attacked. Walking between office buildings I look at the ditch beside the footpath and think, When the Apache helicopters come, I’ll dive in there. I hear shooting from the rifle range and duck for cover, and glance around to see if I’ve been observed.

One night at home during a loud thunderstorm, I am so alarmed by the violent cracks of lightning that I can barely stay in our bed, jerking and gasping with each repeated strike, stomach muscles balled with fear, waiting for an artillery shell to smash through the roof and explode. After the storm I lie awake, staring into the darkness while my fingers twitch with residual fear.

The nightmares are getting worse, even to the extent that I come awake to find that I have leapt from the bed to cower in a corner or that I have pinned Jane’s arms in my own, shouting at her to take cover from some phantom threat. The alarm on her face when I come to my senses cuts me to my soul, and I feel ashamed. A deeper worry nags at me: what if one night I dream that Jane is the threat, and attack her?

In the midst of this I am sent on a speaking tour of military units and civilian groups. I am a novelty, a combat veteran at a time when Australia has had no experience of battle since Vietnam nineteen years ago. I find public speaking easy and the talks go well, but the events I describe are so far away, so out of scale with the strivings of our small defence force, so alien to our comfortable and predictable life in Australia, that I feel I am relating the plot of some epic fantasy novel.

The talks take their toll, each one leaving me more unsettled. Most of the people I address thank me but I am surprised to find that some, a small minority, are hostile. After one session I am packing up my maps and papers when someone confronts me to tell me I've taken part in a massive drive-by shooting and asks how it feels to have killed so many innocent people. On another occasion I am waiting outside the office of the commanding officer of a unit whose soldiers I am about to address when, unaware that I am nearby, I overhear him ask his assistant, 'How long does the fake hero plan to speak for?' He emerges to find me standing there, rigid with fury, and I fight the urge to hit him.

I wrestle with unfocused anger. I am resentful that, despite the public speeches and conversations with colleagues, the events I describe are of brief interest but no real relevance to others. I am troubled that I am unable to talk to anyone who shared my experiences. My letters to Steve and Pete go unanswered—possibly the mail has been lost in the reorganisation of units. Maybe they want to forget.

I feel an angry confusion that I am so plagued by foolish emotions and irrational fears when the time I spent in combat was so short, just four days of fighting despite the months of preparation. I think of the veterans of earlier wars, away from home for years, survivors of truly horrific events and deadly battles, and judge myself to be weak in comparison. My only confidante is Jane. But even with her I cannot speak of my darkest

memories, of dead and dismembered men, of headless or incinerated corpses, of the stench of rotting flesh, or the hands of soldiers buried alive. I fear exposing her to these gruesome incidents, of somehow infecting her with the same malaise that afflicts me.

I begin to practise a skill that I will hone and polish for the next two decades—the ability to lock away the memories, to conceal the irrational fears that stalk me, to present a composed and positive face to the world. In private, I will suffer and sometimes weep in frustration or shame at my weakness. In time I will become very good at this deception. Now, however, only months since my two-man crew and I endured the madness of the Iraq war, I am yet to perfect this talent.

After a particularly gruelling nightmare I arrive at work so tired and emotionally drained that I cannot pretend otherwise. My boss Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Jones notices my unease. He is a veteran of Vietnam, a former infantryman. He calls me into his office and asks me, quietly and with obvious concern, whether I am all right.

I hesitate to answer, fearful of appearing foolish or self-absorbed. He tells me that I don’t seem to be my normal cheerful self and asks if I am feeling troubled after Iraq. He is the first person in the military to do so. There are no mandatory post-operations screening interviews, no counselling sessions, no awareness programs on the emotional stress of combat. These will come into being later, much later, but now there’s just me and my commanding officer, a perceptive man with a good heart.

Finding it hard to meet his eyes, I struggle through an inadequate account of the dreams and other problems. But he senses the depth of my unhappiness and tells me that he saw similar issues among his friends after returning from Vietnam. He hints at suffering similarly but does not elaborate. He tells me that I should get some help, and recommends that I speak to a counsellor or psychologist. As a first step, an appointment with

the unit medical officer is arranged. As I listen to him speaking on the telephone to make the arrangements, a wave of sadness and self-pity washes through me and I am embarrassed to feel tears prickling my eyes. I hide my face and my boss also looks away quickly. We are both embarrassed.

A few days later I find myself in the stark waiting area of the mental care wing of a veterans' hospital in Melbourne. Jane is with me and I hold her hand, deeply uncertain of being here and of talking with the psychiatrist. A man in flannelette pyjamas comes down the hall, a patient, shuffling in slippers. His hair is awry and he says something incoherent to us, an air of accusation in his voice. We sit mute, staring back at him, until he turns and wanders off, muttering to himself.

My unease deepens. 'I don't think I can do this,' I whisper to Jane. She squeezes my hand and tells me it's okay and to be strong, as she has done so often in the months since I came home and as she will do so many times in the years to come.

The psychiatrist, a man in his sixties wearing a tweed jacket, emerges from his office and beckons me. Inside, I sit on a straight-backed chair and he consults a note from the army doctor, which simply asks him to see me as a result of some 'emotional difficulties' since returning from Iraq. He asks me what I did there and, as with my commanding officer, I struggle to recount in a few words the succession of almost non-stop action that filled those intense days. I mention my exposure to a number of dead enemy soldiers and brush quickly over the spikes of terror that punctuated our solitary travels. When asked about my current frame of mind I tell him I have frequent nightmares and I often feel unsettled and edgy during the day.

He makes some notes, but his response is dismissive. He tells me I'm just down in the mouth and that things will settle down eventually. He tells me to try to think of pleasant things before I go to sleep. I am told to avoid

dwelling on disturbing memories and to get on with my work and family matters.

The interview is over. I have a strong sense he thinks I am exaggerating, or fishing for sympathy. He wishes me a curt ‘good luck’ and begins writing his notes before I have left the room.

Outside, Jane sees my face and knows something is wrong. ‘Let’s go,’ I say, tight-lipped. We drive home, in an uncharacteristic silence. It will be another year before I again try to get help. That evening, the nightmares return.

In the months that follow I battle the demons. I have no name for the fears that sweep through me, for the feelings of shame for my mental weakness, or the sense of dread that lurks at the corners of my mind. I develop a ritual to prepare myself for each day, mentally shoving aside the ashes of my dreams, burying the nagging anxiety deep down in my consciousness, pushing away the dark self-pity that I so despise yet which constantly laps at my psyche. I remind myself that my war was quick and clean, a shadow of the suffering of older veterans, and berate myself for being so defenceless against my memories. They’re just memories, I tell myself.

Our simple, happy home is my refuge. Jane comforts me, even though I know she is as confused by my distress as I am. We both know that my experiences in Iraq have changed me, damaged me somehow, but I struggle to articulate the confusing effects of that brief but intense period of battle. Our marriage has always felt special, a soul-deep connection, and I draw heavily on Jane’s patience and compassion. On the days or nights when I am rigid with tension or suffused by an unreasoning and directionless anger, she calms me, talks to me, or just holds my hand. I am grateful that our two sons, David and Daniel, are oblivious to my distraction and agitation. Watching them race by on their bicycles, or wrestling with them on the

carpet or listening to accounts of their adventures, I think of how close I came to death, how near I was to missing all this, to not seeing them grow up, and I seize that thought like a drowning man. For the umpteenth time since coming home I tell myself to get a grip, to stop wallowing in self-pity, to be grateful that I am not alone, to cherish my family.

Sometimes it works, and I feel my mood lighten and the fears subside, but the demons are never far away. After a string of bad nights I find myself fighting off sleep even when I am so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. I'll do anything to avoid another nightmare. I feel worn down by the constant battle to put on a happy face for the world. On occasions I find myself sitting in our car outside my office, weeping inexplicably. The same question keeps coming back: What's wrong with me?

Eventually, more than a year after coming home, I realise I'm losing the battle. I make an awkward visit to the unit medical officer to ask for help. The young doctor seems perplexed and makes a clumsy attempt to empathise with me. I feel a rush of impatience, knowing that he can have no real notion of my experiences or their consequences, but I swallow the indignation that the rational part of me knows is unfair. Even so, as I leave his office I cannot help but feel simultaneously contemptuous of his ignorance and embarrassed by my weakness.

Arrangements are made for me to see a psychologist and a few days later I visit him in a small country town not too far from where we live. In what appears to be a spare room in the psychologist's house, I take a deep breath and sketch out the sequence of events of those momentous days in Iraq and Kuwait. I mumble through an account of the nightmares and flashbacks. I stare at a spot on the floor, feeling foolish and humiliated, as I describe the waves of anxiety that sweep over me, the nameless fears that compel me to search for threats around me, the dismay and anger I feel at my inability to simply will away this problem, to be normal again.

We talk for an hour. Almost all of what is said slides past, unremembered, but two points the psychologist makes stick with me.

The first is his assertion that my reactions are normal, that similar symptoms would be experienced by anyone exposed to such repeated and violent events in which their life was at real risk. Normal, I think. This is normal? All these crippling emotions and ridiculous fears aren't signs of weakness, or failure? Can that be true?

The second is that these symptoms, this mess of emotions, has a name. For the first time I hear the term post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. It is a recognised condition, first diagnosed in Vietnam veterans but subsequently seen in survivors of natural disasters, abductions, personal assaults, even major road accidents. I am told that, in simple terms, the images and emotions associated with a traumatic event can be 'imprinted' in the mind, etched in the psyche like a ghost image permanently burnt into a television screen. The psychologist tells me the brain somehow replays these impressions, so that the original event is re-experienced, or so that the mind becomes locked in a state of increased arousal, always searching for threats, hyper-alert for unexpected stimuli such as loud noises or sudden movement. He tells me my difficulties getting to sleep, or staying asleep, are normal—there's that word again, normal—as are the feelings of unfocused anger that cloud my mind so often.

The session ends. I attend a few more counselling sessions over the coming months and these are helpful. But the greatest benefit comes from the knowledge that what I am feeling, the emotional battles I fight each day, the nightmares and the flashbacks, are all normal. And now I have a name for the demons: PTSD. I understand, imperfectly but sufficiently, why I feel this way, what caused it.

This isn't the solution to my problems, not even close. There will be many more months and years of formless anxiety, ill-defined anger,

unwelcome flashbacks and shuddering nightmares. But at least now I know what is wrong with me. I can begin to fight.

My private war is underway.

15

JANE’S STORY, PART 1

I was just so relieved he had survived the war without being injured or maimed, that he’d come home alive. The John who arrived at the airport looked like my John, with a smile on his face, a kiss for me and hugs for our two boys. He told me a little of his adventures, but we focused mostly on having our family back together.

I was proud of my own achievements. I’d got Daniel, David and myself home from Germany, organised a house, arranged for all our belongings—scattered between air freight, sea freight and storage—to be delivered, bought a car, got the boys into school, connected the phone and the power to the house, redirected the mail and done all the hundreds of other tasks military wives do when the system decides that it’s time for a move. My brothers had helped erect a trampoline, a Christmas gift for our youngest son, and I’d had a lot of support from the rest of my family.

When John arrived he was pleased to see everything was organised, although we later changed the car that I’d gone to so much trouble to find, and he had reservations about the new dog the boys had chosen—he turned out to be a great family pet but he wasn’t too bright. None of that really mattered. I had my husband back. He’d survived a war that we’d been told back in Germany was likely to be horrific, with high casualties. He’d made it home.

But in the days that followed the nightmares started. I would wake in the middle of the night to find him tossing in his sleep, arms twitching. He

would groan as though trying to speak. The first time I touched him, to wake him from a bad dream, he jerked awake so violently it frightened me. For a moment or two he didn't seem to be in the room, but somewhere else, somewhere that terrified him.

Sometimes he'd tell me what the dream was about. I'd listen and hold him, trying to ease his distress. When he eventually fell asleep again I'd lie awake in the dark worrying, wondering what I could do to make him better.

Some days he'd be fine—he'd laugh and play with the kids and I'd smile at his jokes. But there were many days that I could tell he was forcing himself to be cheerful as he dragged himself off to work. He was confused about why he was sleeping so badly. He'd become frustrated. 'I was only in combat for a few days, not years like the old Diggers from World War II or even Vietnam,' he'd say. 'I don't understand what's the matter. Why am I acting this way?'

I didn't know the answer and I felt helpless. All I could do was keep loving him and helping him through the bad days and nights.

Sometimes the frustration and anger that he kept bottled up would burst out and I'd listen to him voicing his rage, letting the storm break over me, knowing he wasn't angry at me but at himself and those who seemed to belittle his experiences. All I could do was let the resentment run its course, and be there to offer comfort. It was confusing for me too, and sometimes I cried when I was alone.

The nightmares were frightening. One night I was suddenly woken to find him pushing me out of our bed and forcing me into the corner, shouting something about being attacked. He held me there, pinning me against the wall. In the dim light I could see how distressed he was. He had his forearm across my throat and he was pressing hard against me. I was very scared and shouted at him to wake up, which seemed to take forever. When he came to his senses he was appalled by what he'd done and apologised time

and again. Then he slumped to the floor, leaning back against the wall, weeping and shaking. I sat too, trying to calm him. It was an awful night.

The first time John went to see a psychiatrist was awful too. It was more like a lunatic asylum than somewhere for a returned soldier to get help. It was as though no-one took him seriously. It seemed the army had forgotten everything they'd learnt from previous wars about the mental effects of combat. I felt angry that the army just expected him to get on with it. Perhaps if we'd had more soldiers involved in the actual fighting it would have been different. I know John felt alone and isolated, especially when his letters to the young British soldiers he'd been with didn't get answered.

There was an official 'welcome home' parade in Sydney and we went, thinking it would be helpful. The parade ended up being run by the navy for the navy personnel who'd been hundreds of kilometres from the fighting. John and a couple of other army fellows were tacked onto the back as an afterthought. I felt disappointed that the one or two Australians who had been in the thick of the fighting were sidelined. I could sense that John felt slighted but he didn't say anything at the time. Later, when we were home, we talked about it a little. In the end we decided to just let it go, but it still annoyed us both.

We talked often, which I think was good for John. Over time he shared more of the details of his experiences. I know this upset him, but it was important for us both, so that we could share the burden. It would be many years before we told our families or friends about the depth of his troubles, and even then it was guarded. We shielded the boys too. They were only young and there was no reason to upset them or have them worrying about their dad although David, our oldest boy, had heard the cries in the night and knew his father was sleeping poorly.

As the months and years passed, the bad memories, nightmares and other feelings that plagued John became another part of our life together. It was our secret, our private struggle, and it bound us even more closely together. But the sense of loneliness he felt never really lessened.

When Anzac Day came around, or the anniversary of the Gulf War, John was often quiet and a little withdrawn. I felt sad that he had no-one in Australia, in our army, to share his story with. Because of our distance from the UK and America there was no Gulf War veterans' association that he could be a part of, where he could meet old friends and reminisce about what they'd seen and done. Once, in Canberra, the organisers of the Anzac Day march shoved John in with the peacekeeping group. Peacekeeping? John had been in combat, not on a peacekeeping mission. John stopped marching on Anzac Day unless he had formal duties.

His difficulties came in cycles. Sometimes he would be fine for weeks. Then something would trigger a bad dream and we'd spend another disturbed night together, or I'd see his face and could tell immediately he wasn't feeling good. We learnt to avoid things that upset him, like news footage of war zones, war movies or even books, but it was hard for him to divorce himself from such images or ideas at work.

I thought I'd heard the worst of the stories until one night several years after John had come home. We were watching a drama about Australian prisoners of war under the Japanese in World War II. I had my reservations about doing this, but John had always been keen on military history and the context seemed a long way from his experiences in Iraq. It was fine until a scene was played out where a sick and semi-conscious Australian soldier was accidently buried alive with those who had died. The burial team had moved off and it seemed the unfortunate man was doomed. Suddenly he thrust his hand up through the mud.

John convulsed with shock. He shouted ‘No!’ and became so agitated he could hardly breathe. He wept uncontrollably. I was totally confused. Gradually, with a terrible effort, he told me about the hand of the Iraqi soldier who’d been buried alive and how, for reasons he couldn’t fully understand, the image had haunted him since. I asked if there were other things, other bad memories he hadn’t told me about. He said there were some, but he would tell me in time. It was too hard to blurt them all out at once.

Over the years I heard other stories, often from that long night when he and his little team had wandered between two armies. But I always had a sense there were other memories too painful to share. I didn’t press the issue. It was enough that he’d told me what he could.

Before he’d gone to the Gulf War we’d had a fairly active social life, but afterwards mixing with people didn’t hold the same appeal. I could sense John becoming tense in crowded situations. He could put on a brave face, but I knew he was feeling threatened and uneasy. We started to avoid social situations although we still enjoyed the company of family and close friends, where John could relax. He would sometimes say, ‘It’s you and me against the world, my darling,’ and I knew what he meant. Together we struggled to beat the demons that the war in Iraq had given him.

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The years passed. Our boys grew and made us proud. The army moved us several more times. I made a new home for us in each location. John went up the ranks. He buried his memories deeper. There were good days and bad days. We guarded his secret, his private battles. We got on with our lives.

SECOND GULF WAR, 2006

16

BACK TO IRAQ

Baghdad, Iraq, 2006

Baghdad smells of shit and fear.

I've spent a week getting here and I am standing beside a helicopter pad in the optimistically named Camp Victory, a heavily fortified enclave adjacent to Baghdad airport. It is three years since George W. Bush stood on the deck of USS *Abraham Lincoln* and declared, 'Mission accomplished.' Today we're told it's too dangerous to drive 12 kilometres along the notorious Route Irish to my new office in one of Saddam's old palaces. This morning a car bomb was detonated on a truck convoy. It's decided we'll travel by helicopter. As I wait with an assortment of US military personnel, contractors and diplomats, I can't detect the faintest whiff of victory. Only shit and fear.

It's been fifteen years since I first fought in Iraq as a major, and since then I've risen to the rank of brigadier. My family and I have moved half a dozen times. We've lived an army life. Among numerous postings, I have been the commanding officer of the Royal Military College at Duntroon, been the director of the Force Development Group designing the future army and, most recently, commanded a brigade of 3,000 combat troops based outside Darwin.

My private battles with PTSD have waxed and waned. Most days I keep the demons at bay. Nights are still difficult. During good weeks there

might be only one or two nights when I am tormented. Other weeks are more of a test, when the imagery running through my head has me tossing and twitching in my sleep until some nightmare calamity hits with such force that I bolt awake, sweating and shaking.

A few years after coming home from the First Gulf War, I hit a particularly rough patch. For no good reason, I found myself drifting into apprehension and unhappiness. My days were haunted by horrible memories and flashbacks. Work demanded I be on top of my game and be an example to others. I burned through stores of emotional and physical energy to maintain that veneer. Eventually, I went to see a friend who was an army doctor. I was allowed time off under the pretext of some other illness. I saw another psychiatrist who prescribed medication to help with the anxiety. I was given sleeping pills, which numbed me sufficiently each night to get through the following day. After a while, the demons retreated and the symptoms of PTSD lessened. It was a pattern that repeated itself over the years that followed.

I had a spell of several months in 2004 when I dared to think I had beaten the demons. I was new in my job as a brigade commander in the Northern Territory, brimming with excitement. I revelled in being out in the field again, surrounded by soldiers, far from the thankless grind of staff work in Canberra. My days were busy and fulfilling. I fell into bed each night and drifted off into an undisturbed sleep.

It wasn’t to last.

That year the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, invited me to accompany him on a visit to our troops in Iraq. It was a troubling and enlightening trip, the first time I’d been back since 1991, and as I stepped off the Hercules and onto Iraqi soil I remembered my earlier tour like it was yesterday. My first glimpse of Iraqi soldiers with AK-47s slung over their shoulders was unsettling. I found myself gazing at them

intensely, trying to recalibrate my perceptions. These guys are on our side now, I had to remind myself.

We'd landed in the north of the country where some of our Diggers were manning a bleak outpost, training Iraqi soldiers. Snow and ice encrusted the buildings, and the soldiers apologised for not being able to offer us a meal—their resupply routes had been under constant attack and they were low on food. They were keyed-up after a sharp gunfight with insurgents who'd ambushed them in a nearby village. Their situation was a vignette of what was happening across the entire country: organised insurgents were attacking patrols, disrupting supply and communication lines, and killing anyone who cooperated with the Coalition.

Towards the end of the trip as we flew south towards Kuwait, General Leahy leaned towards me and said, 'This'd be your old stamping ground, wouldn't it?'

I looked at the digital map in the centre of the aircraft's instrument panel and saw instantly what he meant: we were passing over the area where I'd struggled through the brutal days of my earlier war. I gazed down through the cockpit windows at the featureless desert below, lost in thought. Our little crew, Steve, Pete and I, had been just tiny specks in that expanse, while around us swirled vast and lethal forces. The legions of tanks and hundreds of thousands of troops who fought that war were long gone. I knew I should be thinking something profound about the moment, divining something meaningful from it. Perhaps something about time and events marching on, of not dwelling in the past, of letting the tide of experience just flow past. But all I felt was a sense of melancholy for the lives lost and the damage done. And here we are again, I thought.

Back in Australia I immersed myself in the job of commanding my brigade. We dispatched humanitarian teams to Indonesia after the devastating tsunami in late December 2004. We prepared groups of soldiers

for overseas service in Iraq, East Timor and the Solomon Islands. We conducted a major sea and land exercise in north Queensland, storming ashore by landing craft and helicopters to confront the ‘enemy’. We were intensely busy: we practised our craft, fired our weapons and maintained our equipment. It was a great time to be a soldier.

Despite the pleasure I took in my command, I also felt a peculiar sense of unfinished business whenever I thought of Iraq. The decision to stop the war in 1991 after 100 hours was political, not military, in nature. It played well in the press. Although the Iraqi Army was by then impotent against the Coalition, and the way to Baghdad was virtually open, the defeat and occupation of Iraq hadn’t been part of the United Nations agenda. Almost certainly the Arab nations in the Coalition would have baulked at the idea. An advance on Baghdad would have undermined the international community’s outrage over Kuwait and weakened the unity of its determination to rebuff Saddam Hussein. So we let a substantial portion of his forces escape. Saddam used them later to brutally suppress anti-government uprisings by Shi’a Muslims in the south of Iraq and Kurds in the north. Now there was a new war. The nightly news carried images of Iraq and the troops fighting there. I knew I had to go back, to be part of it.

When I paid another visit to Iraq in 2005, this time with the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, my determination was cemented. Not only did I feel a compulsion to contribute to the fight in Iraq but I had a notion, perhaps a foolish one, that I might somehow purge the demons of my earlier war there, find some sort of redemption from the guilt and anxiety that gnawed at my mind.

So began my campaign to be deployed. I lobbied General Leahy, in person and by letter. He was unmoved. He told me jokingly but firmly to ‘bugger off’ and worry about my brigade. I asked General Gillespie to

intercede on my behalf. I pestered my boss, the division commander, and convinced him to take up my case. Silence.

I was posted back to Canberra, to a job overseeing the career management of all the army's soldiers and officers. I thought my chance to go to Iraq had slipped by. Then one day I got a call out of the blue from General Leahy. I figured he wanted a briefing on officer management.

'Right, Cantwell,' he began. My heart sank. The use of my surname was not a good sign. 'I'm sick of you haranguing me about a job in Iraq.'

I swallowed. 'Yes, sir,' seemed the best reply.

He paused and said: 'So I'm sending you there to shut you up.'

And so here I am in Camp Victory boarding a helicopter to take me to one of Saddam's old palaces. Like my fellow passengers I've shrugged on my heavy body armour and shoved on a helmet. I lug my bags to the chopper, buffeted by the downwash of rotor blades. Jammed in, strapped tight and deafened, I'm seated beside the open door of the Black Hawk. Beside us its sister ship, also laden with human cargo, lifts into a hover and our helicopter likewise hauls itself upwards to settle a few metres above the landing pad. In a well-practised ballet the helicopters nose over in tandem, blades biting the air, engines straining, and we are away.

We are already travelling at speed as we clear the concrete barriers protecting the landing zone. I wait for the expected climb to a safe height but the choppers level off at a very low altitude and accelerate. A gale blasts through the doors, flogging the passengers. We cross a field packed with military trucks and then, without warning, we are over the suburbs of Baghdad.

Below the belly of our helicopter, houses zip past at dizzying speed. Television antennas, washing lines flagged with laundry, and knotted telephone lines are just metres away. The pilot lifts the aircraft slightly to avoid a large advertising sign, then changes direction suddenly, throwing

the chopper onto its side and causing me to briefly dangle in my straps above the houses rushing below. As we roll out on a new heading, over the howling engine and the slap of the rotor blades I hear someone let loose an exultant ‘Yee-haaaa!’ My fellow passengers are variously exhibiting nervous, excited or done-it-all-before expressions.

The door gunner on my side of the Black Hawk half-squats behind his machine gun. The strap tethering him to the helicopter whips about as he swings the weapon at perceived threats. Just ahead a man stands alone on the roof of a house, a possible menace. The machine-gunner snaps around to take aim and the pilot jinks to one side. I see the man’s pale upturned face below, instantly replaced by another blur of brown buildings, piled rubbish, crawling traffic and straggling pedestrians.

A wide river slides into view: it’s the Tigris, snaking through the centre of Baghdad. I notice reed beds and a small vessel cutting a wake in the dirty water before we turn hard again. We reduce speed slightly and I see my destination. On the north bank of a bend in the Tigris, surrounded by concrete barriers, palm trees and a host of smaller buildings, sits the Republican Palace. Built for royalty in the 1950s, it now houses the senior headquarters of the 150,000 Coalition troops fighting in Iraq.

The palace is a vast sandstone monolith, flat-topped except for a gleaming blue-green dome crowning the central structure. Curved colonnaded wings extend from the northern face of the building, embracing the grounds and an empty ornamental pool. But the grandeur is blighted by browned and patchy lawns, a coating of dust and hundreds of prefabricated structures pressing against its flanks, like barnacles on a hull.

I feel a ripple of anticipation as our aircraft begins a fast approach then lands on an already crowded helicopter pad.

We are herded towards an area where Humvees, civilian four-wheel drives and wind-whipped soldiers wait for new arrivals. A young American

officer in desert fatigues steps towards me, snaps a salute, then thrusts out a hand and grabs mine in a vice-like grip. Over the noise he shouts that he is Captain Cory Roberts, my new aide. He is around my height, five foot nine or so, but with well-developed shoulders and the arms of a dedicated weightlifter. If nothing else he'll be able to pick me up and run for cover if we get into strife.

I'm deposited outside one of the white huts I'd seen from the air. My new home is the kind you see in mining camps, a rectangular box with a door and one window. It is surrounded by dozens of identical huts where other officers sleep. High sandbag walls envelop the accommodation area and run through it, designed to limit the blast and shrapnel of mortars or rockets. Elsewhere, 3.5-metre-tall concrete walls, called T-walls, form further protective barriers. At the end of each row of huts are large yellow concrete boxes, shelter for anyone caught in the open during an attack.

I ask how often the place gets mortared or rocketed. 'Reasonably often, sir,' answers Cory. 'A few times a week, sometimes more. Usually it lands somewhere else in the IZ.' He pronounces the abbreviation for the International Zone as 'Eye-Zee' in the American style. It's also known as the Green Zone, the Iraqi-preferred description. 'They've got some sort of weapons-locating radar up on the roof of the palace,' he says, pointing up to an array of antennas and satellite dishes four floors above. 'Sometimes the radar sees the rockets or mortars in flight, and you'll hear a siren and a loudspeaker message to "Duck and Cover".'

'Sometimes?' I query.

'Usually the siren goes off after the rounds have landed,' he says with a shrug.

My lodgings comprise a narrow bed, a bedside table, a cupboard, a metal desk and a bar fridge. An air-conditioner buzzes on the wall. A fridge and air-con in a war zone! God bless America.

Cory walks me around the compound, pointing out the laundry, the gymnasium and the dining facility. We stand for a time out the front of the palace so I can observe the routine at the heavily guarded entrance. Somewhere close to this spot, the last monarch of Iraq, King Faisal II, and his entourage, including his Egyptian fiancée, were lined up and shot by army officers in a coup on 14 July 1958. The Republic of Iraq was created that day and this palace renamed to mark the country's new status.

Two decades later the Republican Palace got a new owner when a shepherd's son from a village northwest of Baghdad became the fifth President of the Republic. Saddam Hussein used this palace for ceremonial events and to meet foreign heads of state. He would descend the marble entrance stairs—where I am now—to stand, dark-haired, moustachioed and smiling at visiting presidents and sheikhs. He is presently languishing in a building not far across town, on trial for crimes against humanity. He will probably be hanged.

Cory shows me the swimming pool, fully functioning and sparkling blue. A dozen people lounge around it or splash in the water, a mix of military personnel and civilians from the US embassy, located at one end of the palace. Web gear and rifles sit next to beach towels.

Gazing at this incongruous sight, I hear a deep boom from beyond the concrete barriers and stifle a flinch. Moments later a plume of dark smoke rises above the top of the T-walls. 'Car bomb,' says Cory, without inflection. Not far away, a car rigged with high-grade explosives has detonated. Almost certainly many people have been killed and injured. No-one around the pool even looks up. I find the juxtaposition of poolside relaxation and violent death by car bomb deeply unpleasant. I silently vow not to use the pool.

We are admitted to the palace by an armed civilian contractor from somewhere in South America. '*Gracias, señor*,' says Cory as we pass. I am

photographed and handed an ID card and follow Cory along marble-floored corridors. At intervals along the polished stone walls are heavy wooden doors, most open to reveal desks jammed with computer screens, telephones, coffee cups, American flags on sticks, and photos of smiling families. Uniformed personnel, almost all of them American, sit at each desk. The noise of talking, typing and phones creates a great babble in the echoing space. In the corridors a ceaseless stream of people, most clumping along in military boots, adds to the hubbub. I stop at various times to sign forms or receive a briefing.

The grandeur of the palace interior is deceptive. In many places a web of cracks runs through the marble. Loose wires dangle from ill-fitted and worn light switches. The glass in the windows is cracked or missing. Wooden surfaces are scarred and dented. Along with an insidious grey dust, the ripe smell of sewage creeps through every window and doorway, and up from every drain.

In a corridor we find the man I will replace as the Director of Strategic Operations for MNF-I (Multi National Force—Iraq). He's a fellow Australian, Brigadier Steve Day. Steve is weary after a year in Iraq but I get a warm welcome. He begins the difficult process of trying to impart his knowledge of Iraq's byzantine political, security and social structures. He has a week to do it. For the next four days he will remain the director while I try to absorb what he is doing and why. For three days I will take his place while he coaches me. Then I'll be on my own.

I will answer to the Chief of Operations for MNF-I, an American two-star general named Eldon Bargewell. Major General Bargewell is an esteemed elder statesman in the US Special Forces community. Gruff and impatient of fools, he rose from the ranks after distinguished service in Vietnam. During my first meeting with him he notes that I served in

Operation Desert Storm, then growls, ‘This fucked-up shitfight is a different kettle of fish from that war.’

My core role will be to lead planning and coordination of strategic-level operations across the whole of Iraq. In this context, strategic operations are those that impact on the overall Coalition campaign, not the day-to-day combat operations of brigades and battalions doing battle out in the streets and fields. When I ask for examples, Steve cites the security of the national oil infrastructure, steps to reduce the movement of weapons and insurgents across Iraq’s borders, and the synchronisation of major combat operations with longer-term objectives for the country.

I will also be in charge of the Strategic Operations Centre, where every aspect of the war is monitored. Other duties include consultation with the most senior officers of the Iraqi security forces; security for the president, prime minister and other key leaders in the fledgling Iraqi government; hostage and prisoner-of-war rescue operations; synchronisation with Coalition Special Forces operating in Iraq; liaison with the US and other embassies; and whatever else the Commander of the MNF-I, General George Casey, wants. ‘The best advice I can offer,’ Steve says in his measured style, ‘is to stay flexible and be patient with the Iraqis.’

I spend the first night in my hut trying to memorise the structure of the vast US and Coalition military enterprise in Iraq. I stare at maps of the country and Baghdad city, attempting to learn the names of significant regions, provinces, cities and suburbs. The next day we delve into the social and political geography of Iraq in general and Baghdad in particular. I burn hours absorbing the arcane allegiances of the two key Muslim groups in Iraq, the Shi’as and the Sunnis, and their many factions.

By the time I fall into bed on the second night my head is spinning with evaluations of the security in each of the many Baghdad suburbs, classified assessments of various terrorist organisations, judgments on the quality of

the Iraqi security forces, and the details of dozens of Iraqi military commanders, militia chiefs, insurgent groups, Al Qaeda operatives, religious leaders, criminal gangs and Iraqi politicians. The names of the politicians sometimes also crop up in the lists of thugs and thieves. The learning curve isn't steep, it's vertical.

The next day we set off along Route Irish, the first of a hundred or more such trips over the coming year, to be shown around the ornate Al Faw Palace in Camp Victory, near the airport. The palace was Saddam's seat of power. I'm here to be introduced to General Casey and Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli, the US three-star general who directly commands the tens of thousands of combat troops in Iraq. General Casey, who splits his time between offices in the IZ and Camp Victory, is a focused and demanding officer with a nose for detecting bullshit. He has been in Iraq since June 2004 and has an unrivalled understanding of the conflict. Lieutenant General Chiarelli has his headquarters in Al Faw Palace. He is tall, genial and insightful. This is his second tour, having commanded a cavalry division here in 2003–04. He now runs the war on a day-to-day basis. I will get to know both generals well in the year ahead.

Back at the Republican Palace I walk around meeting my new staff, about 120 people. Sprinkled among the Americans are a couple of Australians. Many of the army officers are on their second tour of Iraq, as is my aide, Cory. I am greeted cordially but sense the need to prove myself.

While my rapid education has been underway the war has continued outside the T-walls. I watch as Steve deals with reports of kidnappings, shootings, car bombs and executions. He's looking for events that might have wider implications or political fallout. One of the latest kidnap victims has connections with the Iraqi prime minister's power base, and the need to brief him presents an opportunity for me to be introduced. We cross the IZ

in an armoured Chevrolet, passing buildings bombed by the Coalition in 2003.

As we near the prime minister's compound, Steve points out the massive, circular Monument to the Unknown Soldier occupying a man-made hill adjacent to the road. It is a tribute to Iraqis killed in the war with Iran in the 1980s and was a point of reference for Coalition bomber pilots in 1991 and 2003. Behind it rears the gigantic crossed swords of the famous Victory Arch, where Saddam once reviewed the might of his armed forces. Reminders of Iraq's bloody history are everywhere.

I am instructed to leave my body armour and pistol in our vehicle, as a courtesy to the prime minister, and we are eventually ushered past a bevy of supplicants into his office.

Ibrahim al-Jaafari greets me with a soft smile and an even softer handshake. He manages a few words in English before reverting to Arabic with a translator at his elbow. He was recently installed by his political party following elections last December.

Prime Minister Jaafari is bespectacled and balding with a grey beard. He has a kindly face but can deploy an acidic glance. Steve introduces me formally and Jaafari warmly welcomes me to Iraq and thanks me for coming to help his people. In the Arab fashion I make suitably flowery remarks in response, expressing my hope for a bright future for Iraq and praising his central role in it. The prime minister makes a deprecatory wave and we all smile. My first steps in the world of Middle East diplomacy have gone well. Next stop, peace in Palestine.

Steve gently introduces the topic we've come to discuss and Jaafari listens attentively to the information on the kidnapping of one of his associates, occasionally gesturing to an assistant to make a note. He asks no questions and I have the impression he knows more about it than we do. The prime minister thanks us for the briefing and promises to 'look into this

distressing matter very carefully'. He pledges to inform us of any developments.

Back in the office I reflect on our meeting and Jaafari's assurance that he will take the matter further. I feel a mild sense of achievement. Later, I will come to learn that such assurances from Iraqi politicians and generals can mean almost anything, but they are usually code for 'That's interesting but I don't really care.' For now though, as I gather up some papers for a briefing by one of my section heads, I perceive Jaafari's comments as positive and helpful. I haven't yet become the deeply disillusioned sceptic of Iraqi motivations and promises that the coming year will make me.

17

THE DEATH SPIRAL

As I farewell Steve Day and formally take up the post of Director of Strategic Operations, attacks by armed gangs on civilians are a regular and increasing component of the violence in Baghdad. Other parts of Iraq, including the predominately Shi'a city of Basra in the country's southeast, are also enduring daily shootings, kidnappings and murders. A killing spree is underway, the proximate cause a bombing of a holy site.

Soon after dawn on 22 February 2006, just weeks before I arrived in Baghdad, explosions ripped through a mosque regarded by Shi'a Muslims as one of the holiest sites in Iraq. The al-Askari Mosque in the city of Samarra, also called the Golden Mosque for its beautiful dome of 72,000 gold tiles, was destroyed in seconds. Extremists had infiltrated the mosque in the dark, tied up the guards and rigged the building with explosives. Word of the destruction spread like wildfire across Iraq.

Iraq's Shi'a population was outraged. In Baghdad and other predominantly Shi'a cities, men and boys poured onto the streets to vent their anger. In Sadr City, a vast slum in the northeast of Baghdad named after a deceased Shi'a cleric, thousands surrounded the headquarters of his son Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the most influential social, political and religious faction in Iraq. The crowds bayed for revenge. Some speakers addressing the mass of protesters tried to blame the occupying Americans, or Zionists, but few doubted that Al Qaeda was responsible for the mosque's bombing.

Attacks against the Shi’a were nothing new, but up to that point they hadn’t produced widespread retaliation against the Sunni minority. Even the killing of scores of Shi’a in two bombings just days before the destruction of the Golden Mosque had been absorbed. But now the Sunnis—associated by faith with Al Qaeda and still mistrusted because of the repression of the Shi’a under Saddam—became fair game.

Baghdad’s seven million residents knew what was coming. Most went home early and locked their doors. By evening gunfire echoed through the streets. Dozens of Sunni mosques were attacked by bombs, gunfire or arson. By morning more than 100 bodies lay dumped in the streets. Within days a further 300 were killed and hundreds more wounded. It was just the start.

My preparation and previous combat experience are no buffer against the shock I feel at the bloodshed. Dozens of murders and abductions are occurring, often in the open, unchecked by local police. Most Iraqi police are Shi’a and many turn a blind eye to the killings; a few actively participate. Report after report of atrocities is dropped onto my desk. Messages of death blink at me from my email in-box to the soundtrack of sporadic gunfire beyond the T-walls.

Even the terse language of military field reports makes for ghastly reading. Some describe Shi’a gunmen entering the houses of Sunnis, people they’d been neighbours with for decades, killing the occupants and dragging their bloodied corpses onto the road to advertise the attack. One report describes several armed men driving into a market and spraying bullets in all directions. Another tells the story of a Sunni cleric being mobbed, beaten, killed and dismembered, his body parts thrown into a ditch. Events like these are happening all over Baghdad. I feel like I’ve been parachuted into a horror show—but here there’s no suspense. Death is monotonous, unrelenting.

Just across the Tigris River from the Republican Palace, the solidly Shi'a suburb of Karadah sits within a great curve in the river. On either side are suburbs of mixed Muslim sects. Late one evening when I'm walking back to my hut, I hear the sounds of retribution being enacted on the unfortunate Sunnis in those mixed suburbs. I stop and climb onto a high wooden bench to peer across the walled perimeter to the buildings beyond the river. Karadah, like all of Baghdad, suffers from fitful electrical supply. Tonight there is no mains power but the windows are dimly lit by generator-powered bulbs. A few car headlights blink between the darkness of the buildings. I am about to climb down when I see tiny sparks of muzzle flashes and then the sound of AK-47 fire, as recognisable to me now as the bark of a dog. There's a flurry of shots, then silence.

In my office early the following morning, the colonel in charge of the night shift briefs me on the nocturnal events. In Karadah, from where I'd glimpsed the firing, two complete Sunni families are dead. The adults were found lying in the street outside their homes, the bodies of the children inside.

Throughout that day, and on many others like it, more reports of violent attacks stream into the headquarters. In one thirty-hour period eighty-six bodies are found in Baghdad's grubby streets. One morning I am walking back to my office after grabbing a coffee when the sound of a large bomb blast rattles the windows. By the time I reach the Operations Centre the first reports are coming in: a car bomb attack on a group of Shi'a pilgrims has killed more than a dozen. By the end of the day another twenty-three civilians have been killed. The next day, forty bodies, some beheaded, are found in Baghdad and the nearby city of Baquba.

While the death toll among the country's civilian population rises, attacks against Coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces continue unabated. The assault is unrelenting, in the form of roadside bombs,

ambushes, mortar and rocket fire, sniping, grenades attacks and suicide bombers. Soldiers, mostly Iraqis and Americans, are dying every day.

Every one of these deaths is summarised in pithy reports that are circulated around the headquarters. I see the lists of killed and wounded and reflect on what each brief entry represents: ‘2 KIA, 3 WIA’ reads one, detailing how a roadside bomb left an American patrol with two soldiers dead and three others wounded in action; ‘4 KIA’ reads another report, with information about how a huge bomb detonated under a Humvee, blowing the vehicle metres into the air and killing the four young men inside. Photographs attached to the report show the crater and blood-splattered vehicle; a map shows where they died.

I look blankly at the reports, thinking of the families in small towns and cities across the US about to receive news they hoped never to hear. That these dead and crippled soldiers are not Australians makes no difference to the sorrow I feel. The hard-nosed professional in me recognises these losses as the regrettable cost of doing business in a war. Part of me knows that spending too much time dwelling on them is unhealthy and counterproductive. But I cannot dismiss these spent lives so easily. I feel compelled to honour them, even for a few seconds. It is a discipline I will enforce on myself for the next nine months in Iraq, even as the daily toll rises then rises again.

In a letter home to Jane at the end of March 2006, I write:

> My incoming emails tell a horrible story of killings and violence. My in-box spits out dozens of reports every day of multiple deaths among the local population and among the fighting troops in the field. I read these grisly reports, think about any wider implications (does it signify a new attack method, which side did it, what area was it in, etc.) and then I hit the delete key and the

> message is gone. I do this dozens of times a day. But each one is a tragedy for some Iraqi family or Coalition soldier's loved ones. I guess I shouldn't be writing to you about this sort of thing but I think it's important to keep a bit of humanity in this game.

It's not long before I get an insight into the adroit ruthlessness of our opponents and the murky loyalties of some Iraqi politicians. A team from the Iraq Special Operations Force, comprising Iraqi troops but led by US Special Forces soldiers, has assaulted a building in northeast Baghdad, hunting insurgents thought to be responsible for kidnappings and executions. The brief report of the action describes the assault force taking heavy fire from the building then fighting their way inside, killing sixteen insurgents, capturing a large number of weapons, and freeing a bound and tortured hostage. I read the report and silently congratulate the Special Forces troopers on a great job.

Within hours the raid becomes a public relations and political disaster. The mess begins to unfold when one of my officers pokes his head into my office and says, 'Sir, you need to see this. The Iraqis claim we hit a mosque and killed a bunch of innocent civilians.'

Moments later I stand before the 8-metre-wide video screen on the wall of the Operations Centre to see Al Jazeera broadcasting an amateur video of dead Iraqi males strewn about a bullet-holed room. Multiple gunshot wounds dot the bodies and blood pools are visible on the floor. The camera zooms in for a close-up of spent shell casings; they are the 5.56-millimetre type used in American rifles. The voiceover is saying that American forces have attacked the Al Mustafa Mosque, tying up and killing twenty-two people. The footage cuts to a man weeping over a corpse then shows an angry, chanting crowd.

‘Oh shit,’ I say, turning to my senior operations officer. ‘Find out what they’re showing on Iraqi TV and get the ops log out from the time of the raid.’ The operations log is the running report of incidents in the field. ‘We need to get the full story from the Special Operations guys.’

Over the following hours it becomes clear we have been played by Muqtada al-Sadr and his Shi’a militiamen, known as Jaysh al-Mahdi or JAM. The video shows dead people but they are the bodies of gunmen, not innocent mosque-goers. The incident did not occur at the Al Mustafa Mosque, as claimed; that building is six blocks away, unmolested. Our guys left behind sixteen bodies, not twenty-two; the JAM militiamen have ‘obtained’ a few more to beef up the numbers. The rooms in which the fighting occurred were not solely a place of prayer nor was the building on the list of recognised holy places, as claimed. It contained a large weapons cache and a Sunni hostage in the process of being tortured. None of that matters one iota. The JAM propagandists have made our team look like rank amateurs; their video is streaming to the world before we’ve finished our morning coffee. They’ve created a new reality in which the Coalition are violators and murderers. The video is brutal and brilliant.

The western media is repeating the story, the Iraqi media is going nuts and we are in damage control with the Iraqi government. The Minister for the Interior, Bayan Jabr, is a vocal critic of the incident, claiming on national television that ‘Innocent people inside the mosque offering prayer were killed.’ General Casey orders me to accompany a US two-star general to a meeting with Jabr to put the record straight and appeal for calm. Resplendent in a designer suit and neat beard, Jabr harangues us for thirty minutes, utterly dismissing our version of events. Under the lash of his tongue, I reflect on the irony of this man lecturing us on justice and the sanctity of Iraqi lives. I know from the intelligence file I read before coming that he is a former high-ranking member of a ruthless Iranian-

backed Shi'a paramilitary force with plenty of blood on his hands. A few months ago American soldiers discovered a secret detention centre run by Jabr's ministry, containing more than 160 starved and tortured Sunni prisoners. It is suspected that he is complicit in the operation of the Shi'a death squads now wreaking havoc across Baghdad. It's not just ironic, it's breathtaking gall.

On leaving Jabr's office, my American colleague leans close and mutters, 'There is a special room in hell reserved for that asshole.' Climbing back into my armoured car a few minutes later, I feel somehow dirty as it dawns on me that I'll be routinely working with Jabr and people like him for the rest of my time in Iraq.

Along with most of my staff I regularly work sixteen hours a day, rising at 0530 to be in the Operations Centre by 0600 to be briefed on overnight events before the mayhem begins again. I never really know what my tasks will be on any given day. As much as I try to plan ahead, my routine is one of constant reaction to events outside my control. I lead frequent crisis action meetings in the wake of mass murders, kidnappings or attacks on major electrical or oil installations, racing against the clock to try to find out what has happened, plan a reaction, brief my boss and then oversee the response.

On most days I travel around the IZ for discussions with Iraqi politicians and senior army officers. These are relatively safe trips, although rocket and mortar rounds are regularly fired into the area. I also make frequent high-speed trips down Route Irish to meet with senior commanders at Camp Victory, my armoured four-wheel drive escorted by American troopers in well-armed Humvees. Apart from a few bullets fired in our direction, these trips soon become routine.

From time to time I travel into the Red Zone in Baghdad and these trips are never routine. Aside from the constant risk of a roadside bomb or an

ambush, the most memorable aspect of these journeys is the undisguised hostility directed at us by Iraqis on the filthy streets.

Within minutes of returning to my desk, I am confronted with some new crisis and the inevitable grim emails describing more death and wounding. The hours pass in a blur.

Around 2200 hours I clear my desk, make a final check of hot spots across the country, and bid goodnight to the South American guard on the door with a weary '*Buenas noches, señor*.' When I drop into my narrow bed I try to dump the problems running around in my head. I set two separate alarms for the morning, then look at the photos of Jane and our sons on the rickety bedside table before turning off the light. Most nights I am too exhausted to dream, a blessed escape from my demons. Sometimes I am summoned back to the Operations Centre in the middle of the night to handle a disaster, but generally I get about six hours' sleep. I don't know how good I've got it: as Iraq slides towards civil war in the coming months, I will look back on these early days with almost fond nostalgia.

At the end of March 2006, my first month in Iraq, I review the gruesome casualty statistics. The number of attacks against Coalition troops, Iraqi security forces and civilians has increased to an average of 650 per week, almost a hundred a day. Most of these are in Baghdad and nearby districts, and are directed against Coalition forces. Every day there are around twenty Coalition casualties, and many more among Iraqi security forces. Even though Coalition troops are getting hit more often, they are well armed, well protected and well trained. The citizens of Baghdad and the other cities are not. Each attack on them cuts a swathe.

More than a thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed this month. That is a conservative estimate. I keep looking at this figure in disbelief. *One thousand civilians dead* in thirty-one days—mostly at the hands of fellow

countrymen. I try to imagine a catastrophe in Australia that could produce such a loss of life; I can’t. Surely, I think, the situation must improve.

I am naive. It gets a lot worse.

18

THE MADNESS GROWS

Through April, May and June of 2006 the insanity sweeping Baghdad and Iraq descends to new depths. I am in the audience of the world's most sickening snuff movie.

Each morning bodies turn up in increasing numbers. The remains of the victims are often bound at the wrists and ankles. The signs of hideous torture are visible on the bodies; intentionally so—severe burns, whip marks, knife cuts, and the wounds from electric drills and grinders. Kneecaps, shins, elbows, feet and genitals are the favoured spots for the torturers. Eyes are gouged. Women and teenage girls are not spared; self-appointed religious police target females suspected of inappropriate behaviour or dress, and these poor souls are gang-raped and then tortured before being executed. Family-initiated honour killings add to the female toll. One group invents a novel technique whereby the naked victim is bound then dragged around behind a car until the concrete and bitumen literally wear the flesh down to the bone. Sometimes acid is applied to the exposed meat and sinew as a finishing touch. The victims are then executed. This usually entails a shot to the head but beheadings are also common. The bodies are then dumped, sometimes near where they were abducted, but more often they end up in rubbish dumps or in what passes as a sewerage system.

Shortly after yet another nauseating harvest of atrocities I meet with the newly appointed Australian Ambassador to Iraq. He is relatively young and

earnest. He asks me to name the most significant thing I've observed since arriving in Iraq. I look across the chipped circular coffee table between us and say, 'I've learnt that Iraqis like killing people, and they're fucking good at it.' His Excellency looks like he's just been slapped.

The Shi'a militias, especially those under the control of Muqtada al-Sadr, swell with angry men and boys anxious to play their part in the killing. Jaysh al-Mahdi, JAM, proves it is not just skilled at public relations. It also shows us how experts go about winning hearts and minds. JAM positions itself as a provider of basic foodstuffs, work and welfare along with ruthless security for nervous Shi'a neighbourhoods. It even provides a revenge service: militiamen turn up at Shi'a funerals with a few bound and gagged Sunnis who are dragged before the mourners and offered as sacrifices to the memory of the deceased. On request, the unfortunate Sunnis are shot to ease the sadness of the bereaved. Sadr answers all his constituents' needs in one neat package. JAM also infiltrates the Iraqi Police Service, many of whom are sympathetic to the militia's cause. Previously haphazard arrangements have been consolidated into deadly efficient death squads, kidnapping teams, torturers and executioners. There are even teams to dump the bodies. It's the business of death, integrated.

The Sunnis also become more organised, forming neighbourhood protection groups and their own death squads. Al Qaeda in Iraq, under its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, extends some support to the Sunni population but continues to rely on high-profile attacks as its main effort. Zarqawi's calling cards are the lethal suicide bombings that punctuate the daily sectarian killings carried out by Shi'a and Sunni gunmen.

On 7 April I receive a confused telephone call from the prime minister's national security adviser, Dr Mowaffak al-Rubaie. I had enjoyed coffee and conversation at the home of Dr Rubaie the day before, but the calm and urbane man I'd spoken to yesterday is now hysterical, shouting

down the telephone line in an almost incoherent mixture of Arabic and English. He tells me that dozens of devout Shi'as have been martyred in a mosque at Buratha in northern Baghdad. I've not heard of it. I tell him that I'll call him back once I know more.

In the end there isn't much I can add to what the doctor already knows. Three men disguised in the flowing black garments commonly worn by Iraqi women had breezed through the security checkpoint at the mosque as Friday prayers concluded. There weren't enough female police to go around and the male police couldn't search the women entering the mosque. It was an open door. Each intruder wore a suicide vest packed with high explosives and several hundred large ball bearings. One detonated inside the mosque, another ripped apart its host and everyone around him in the courtyard, and the third shattered the office of the imam, who was also a Shi'a politician. When the smoke cleared, eighty people were dead and 160 were wounded, most very badly.

From one of the forensic experts we send to assist the Iraqi police I learn that the heads of suicide bombers are often preserved in the blast, initially being blown vertically before falling back to join the lower legs, which are the only other remaining pieces. Several photographs are produced to confirm this bizarre phenomenon. In the coming months as more and more attacks befall civilians and Coalition soldiers, a part of me listens to myself aghast as I casually ask if the first responders found a head resting near a pair of legs: when I'm answered in the affirmative I say, 'Oh, a suicide vest then,' before moving on to some other problem. This place imparts unpleasant knowledge and hardens the soul.

In April there are five suicide attacks that kill more than 100 people and injure double that. Zarqawi's suicide bombers do better in May: they mount a dozen attacks that claim 120 lives. As the June sun tips the temperature past 40 degrees Celsius and turns the streets of Baghdad into stinking, sun-

baked dumping grounds for more and more bodies, Sunni suicide bombers strike eighteen targets, and add another eighty lives to the tally.

Around this time I become increasingly involved in activities to try to locate soldiers, pilots and certain civilians who are missing in action. A small US team runs the day-to-day business under my loose guidance but I provide direct oversight during high-priority search and recovery operations. In April, three American soldiers are surprised by insurgents while sitting in their Humvee during a security operation south of Baghdad. One of the soldiers is found dead nearby but the other two are abducted. They are declared MIA and I activate the search and recovery cell. The whole of the Coalition bends its vast resources trying to find the two missing men. In a secure room within the palace I spend hour after hour sifting through reports, scraps of intelligence, aerial photographs and telephone intercepts while troops in the field scour farms, villages and towns in the vicinity. We draw circles on our maps showing the largest area in which the pair could have been moved in the first hour, the second hour, the first day, the second day, and so on. By the third day the circles cover half of Iraq. On the fourth day I tell my team to stand down: not because it is time to give up, but because the missing men have been found—at least what's left of them.

The two soldiers have been brutally tortured and executed. I am shown a video and photographs of their remains, which sicken me. They have been butchered, and judging by the amount of blood, they were still alive at the time.

That night and for many nights afterwards I am visited by my demons for the first time since arriving in Iraq. My dreams are gruesome, even by the standard of those that have had me regularly tossing and turning over the past fifteen years. In the morning I bump into a US Navy officer outside

the tiny bathroom we share. He looks worriedly at me. ‘John, you look awful,’ he informs me. ‘Are you okay?’

I know he must have heard my cries during the night, because that’s what woke me. I keep my head down and say, ‘I’m fine, mate, just fine.’ I shower, dress, then walk across the dusty car park to start another day.

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It isn’t only the locals who treat human life with disdain; on rare occasions Coalition troops do likewise. Several months earlier, in November 2005, a group of US marines exacted revenge on civilians in the Iraqi city of Haditha when a roadside bomb killed a fellow marine. They murdered twenty-four unarmed Iraqi civilians including women, children and elderly people. Then they covered it up, claiming the victims were killed in the initial bomb blast or were insurgents. A journalist from *Time* magazine has since uncovered the truth and now a criminal investigation is underway.

My boss, Major General Bargewell, is appointed to conduct a parallel investigation into whether the marines’ chain of command failed to look into the incident properly and if they contributed to the cover-up. I take his place as Chief of Operations for all of the Coalition for a couple of months, a two-star general’s job, in addition to my normal duties. The general’s absence coincides with a marked climb in the levels of sectarian violence and combat operations. My workload effectively doubles. I learn to survive on four or five hours’ sleep a night and buckets of caffeine.

The cycle of revenge becomes self-sustaining, generating its own momentum. An attack is revenged by another, for which another is carried out in retribution, which must itself be avenged. No-one can remember if any one attack is payback or a fresh assault. No-one cares. All that matters

is the killing, fuelled by religion and ancient distrust, and spurred on by Al Qaeda.

A crucial component of the problem is the unreliability of the Iraqi Police Service. They routinely allow armed men through checkpoints. They frequently take no action in the face of crime, mayhem and murder. Some are active players in the killing game. Another component of the internal security forces, the National Police, is a pseudo-commando outfit that harbours numerous highly active death squads. It is obvious that we need to cleanse and improve the Iraqi police if there is to be any hope of reining in the chaos. General Casey declares 2006 the Year of the Police.

Not long after arriving, I decide that I need to establish a close working relationship with key players in the Ministry of the Interior, the MOI, which controls all the police organisations. One of the senior officials I identify as a useful ally is an MOI major general whom I will name Ahmed. I need to call on him, first for introductions and frequently thereafter as we try to implement changes. One minor problem is that General Ahmed has his office in the Red Zone east of the Tigris. It is bandit country. The tall MOI building rising high above the surrounding suburban dwellings makes an easy target and is routinely hit by rifle fire, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. A hardy band of Americans under my command work there full time, as mentors for the Iraqis. I tell my aide, Cory, to arrange for me to meet General Ahmed and check on my troops.

Shortly before our planned vehicle journey across town we receive intelligence that someone within the MOI has leaked information about our trip and that we may be ambushed en route. As a Coalition brigadier-general I would make a nice trophy. Cory rapidly obtains helicopter transport and the next day we land in a cloud of dust next to the MOI building. Walking away from the chopper I glance up at the edifice,

noticing a wide balcony extending from the top floor. That's a great spot for some sightseeing, I think.

When we walk inside we are told there will be a slight delay before General Ahmed can see us. I ask one of the American mentors if I can take a look around from the balcony on the top floor. He glances worriedly at one of the other officers then explains that it isn't exactly safe. I tell him we'll only be out there for a few minutes and that I'm game.

We climb the stairs beside the defunct elevator and emerge onto the balcony. Baghdad spreads out around us, brown with dust and shimmering in the heat. My escort points out the key landmarks: the government buildings topped with enormous Iraqi flags, the Palestine Hotel, where an American tank round killed three journalists in 2003, the unfinished Al-Rahman Mosque that Saddam had intended to be the largest mosque in the world and, nearby, a large crater where a bomb detonated just outside the entrance gate the previous week, mysteriously planted under the noses of the security guards.

One of the Iraqi officers accompanying us tells me this building and its balcony were much feared during Saddam's reign. It was common for the secret police to bring groups of prisoners up here and throw one or two off to encourage the others to speak.

I lean out to look down the long vertical drop to the pavement below. I imagine the terror of making that fatal descent. These Iraqis have got the killing thing down pat, I think.

We pose for a few photos and I'm taking a final look around when there is a splat sound and a puff of brick dust drifts off the wall above us. 'We're getting shot at, sir,' says one of the Americans, unhurriedly. 'Time to go.'

In General Ahmed's office I am greeted with great courtesy and much goodwill. Through an interpreter Ahmed says he is keen to develop a

friendship and to work together. His subordinates all make encouraging noises. We drink tea and I am offered a sweet cake. The discussion goes well. At the conclusion of the meeting I am honoured by an embrace from the general and a kiss on both cheeks. It's the kiss of the devil.

Earlier I had reviewed the detailed file we have on Major General Ahmed. Behind the scenes he is very senior in the Badr Corps, the secretive paramilitary arm of one of the most powerful political blocs in Iraq. It is backed by Iran and has direct connections to the Iranian Quds Force, a special unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard tasked with covert cross-border operations. The Quds help train and supply Shi'a militias in eastern and southern Iraq. General Ahmed's influence exceeds his police rank because of his Badr Corps roots. He is known to use threats and coercion to get his way with his superiors. Sometimes he kills his opponents or has them killed by others. In the fevered internal power struggles inside the MOI, even inside this building, force is sometimes used as an extension of verbal conflict. He's a murderer, but he's our murderer. I have to work with him.

During the short helicopter ride back to the Republican Palace I try not to think too hard about the ethical minefield I'm walking in. In some ways, walking through real minefields in 1991 was easier. At least it was honest work.

That night I reply to an email from our oldest son Dave, who is now also serving in the Australian Army, in which I explain a little about my job. 'I spend a lot of time talking with Iraqi politicians, military officers and senior police figures,' I write. 'The twisted relationships and power plays running through the Iraqi political and security hierarchy are a thing to behold, but I am slowly learning to work with this ambiguity. Nothing is as it seems, there is always a hidden agenda, and the agendas are not always admirable or even legal. It's an interesting brew.'

As I hit ‘Send’, the sound of AK-47s drifts through the window of my office, along with the rancid smell of shitty drains. On my calendar, I cross off another day in Iraq.

19

FRUSTRATION AND SADNESS

It is the peak of summer and oppressively hot, in the high forties. In the front seat of our armoured car Cory lifts his M4 assault rifle to eye level, slides back the bolt slightly to check that a round is chambered and ready to go, then smacks the bolt home.

‘Almost there, sir,’ he says. ‘You might want to put a round up the spout.’

Normally I would have the magazine on my pistol but without a round in the chamber. Today, however, we will be in a building that is routinely used by militia snipers and as a base station for death squads—not your usual Ministry of Health. It is controlled by a minister and officials loyal to the Shi’a militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr. I cock my pistol, check the safety catch is on and then shove it back in its holster. But I don’t really think I’ll need my pistol today. The weapon I will wield is an appeal to reason. I guess I’m an optimist.

We are driving through the rubbish-strewn streets of Baghdad. Ahead and behind my vehicle are several heavily armoured Humvees, forcing a passage through the traffic. To be brought to a standstill here is to invite attack, so my security detail uses a combination of speed and intimidation to bludgeon through knots of Iraqi civilian vehicles. The rear of each of our vehicles has a large red sign in English and Arabic warning motorists not to approach within 100 metres or they will face deadly force. Gunners perched

on the top of each Humvee point their weapons menacingly at potential threats.

They won't hesitate to shoot; I've seen them do it. Just last week the gunner of the Humvee directly ahead of me, a chunky sergeant of Hispanic origin, shot and killed a man in the back of a civilian car. We were on Route Irish and the car came up alongside us and sprayed a burst of AK-47 fire at the convoy. The gunman's rifle then jammed. He could be seen struggling to clear the weapon right up to the moment the sergeant emptied most of his magazine into the Iraqi's head and chest from a few metres away. Another time, a car got too close and the driver refused to respond to obvious signals to back off. One of my security guys put four rounds through the engine of the car, which veered off the road in a cloud of steam and leaking engine oil.

At the Ministry of Health I am greeted without enthusiasm by the deputy minister, a small man who affects an almost comically thick comb-over of hair swept up from the side of his head to cover his balding pate. Later I will joke that if this guy ever used a pool it would look like he was doing synchronised swimming with a beaver. A darkly clad woman enters wordlessly and hands out tea in small glass cups. Mine hasn't been washed properly and gummy lip prints stain the rim. To be polite, I sip the tea. The deputy minister and I exchange a few pleasantries, during which I lament the continuing cycle of violence and the loss of life among the long-suffering citizens of Iraq.

I remark that in July alone the number of violent events in the six major cities climbed past 3,000, a third of these in Baghdad. I remind my host that the civilian death toll for this month, August, is well up from the preceding monthly average of 1,000 deaths and appears to be on track to exceed 2,500. I don't mention to the deputy minister the 4,000 improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Coalition soldiers this month, or that

more than sixty American soldiers died and almost 600 were wounded, many grievously. I suspect he won't care.

I bring the conversation around to the ease with which death squads move around Baghdad. 'There is a certain matter, Your Excellency, a sensitive issue, that I must raise with you,' I say, trying to look regretful. The Iraqi politician lifts a hand, palm upward, to indicate that I should go on. 'Sir, some American vehicle checkpoints have made troubling discoveries. They found that some ambulances belonging to the Iraqi Ministry of Health were not carrying doctors or injured people, but instead contained groups of Shi'a men and many weapons.'

The deputy minister is offended. He tells me that searching the ministry's ambulances is a gross abuse of power by the Americans and that they have violated the sanctity of the Red Crescent painted conspicuously on the vehicles. He also dismisses my assertion that any ambulance of the ministry would be carrying armed men.

I nod slowly, passively accepting his criticism, but then say, 'Your Excellency, I'm afraid that what I say is true. If you will permit me, I will show you photographs taken a few days ago during one such incident.'

I spread half a dozen A4-sized images across the table. They variously show a white ambulance with its rear doors open and, inside, a pile of AK-47 rifles, each with a magazine fitted. Several Russian-made pistols are also visible on the bloodstained floor. Five young men in civilian clothes stand to one side of the door, their wrists bound by white zip-ties, guarded by helmeted American soldiers. 'These men are not employees of the Ministry of Health,' I tell the deputy minister. 'Their identification shows they are Shi'a, from northeast Baghdad, yet they were found near a Sunni neighbourhood late at night on the other side of the city.'

I look directly at him; he has also raised his eyes from the photographs. 'Sir, this is a Shi'a death squad, using one of your ambulances to facilitate

the killing of civilians.’

The deputy minister blinks then says, ‘This is outrageous.’ His voice is flat and his attempt at offended dignity is unconvincing.

I continue, ‘Excellency, I have been directed by General Casey to ask for your assistance in preventing this terrible misuse of the respected symbol of the Red Crescent. No doubt junior persons have done this without approval.’ I don’t believe this for a moment, but that’s irrelevant. ‘I hope that you will condemn such incidents in the strongest terms and help us reduce the terrible death toll on the people of Baghdad.’

The politician looks at me, this time with unfeigned disdain. He waves a hand at the photographs. ‘These are all faked,’ he pronounces. ‘This is a false accusation and it is the propaganda of the Americans.’

I spend the next ten minutes vouching for the authenticity of the reports and the photographs, showing him map locations and describing the mysterious presence of ambulances prior to several mass shootings. The deputy minister remains unimpressed.

I decide to try a mild threat. ‘Sir, the release of such images, should they find their way to the media somehow, would damage the credibility of your ministry and undermine the trust of the Iraqi people in the ambulance service. Of course, the Coalition would not do such a thing but there were many witnesses, civilian witnesses, who might do so.’

The deputy minister narrows his eyes. ‘It would be very unwise for anyone to do such a thing, to spread a lie such as this,’ he says with clear menace.

We might need to be on our guard getting out of here, I think. He pushes the pile of photographs towards me and sits back. The meeting is over. I have achieved nothing.

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As my time in Baghdad passes I have an increasing number of frustrating, sometimes bewildering, encounters like this.

One day a group of gunmen abducts a large number of building workers. One of our surveillance drones happens to be overhead at the time and we know where the captives have been taken: they are being held in a mosque. US troops are nearby but we need Iraqi soldiers or police to make the approach to a place of worship. I hit the phones, trying to organise a response from the Ministry of Interior, but with no success.

The clock is ticking. I make an urgent call to the office of one of the most senior generals in the Iraqi Army, a man I've come to know reasonably well. He has gone home for the day, I am told. It is just after lunch.

Cory stands near my door, waiting to see if I need any help. 'Get the wagon ready, mate,' I say. 'We'll go round to the lazy bastard's house.'

The home of the general is large and well protected by soldiers. I am eventually admitted and directed to the rear of the building.

As I round the corner I hear the unexpected sounds of a game of tennis. Sure enough, there is the general in a T-shirt and shorts, fat and sweating, swatting a tennis ball back to an opponent. I stand at the high wire fence and get his attention, explaining the urgency of the situation and asking for his assistance in issuing the necessary orders for Iraqi troops to search the mosque.

The Iraqi general listens, still puffing, then waves me away. 'Cantwell,' he says, in his usual form of address to me, 'I am playing tennis. See me tomorrow.'

He walks back to the court and directs his opponent to serve. For a moment I remain standing at the wire, hoping he will relent and speak to me again. He doesn't.

Back in the car, I have a rare dummy-spit in front of Cory and my driver. ‘Just once, just once, it’d be nice to get a sense that these fuckers care as much about their fucking country and their fucking people as we do!’

Hours later, when I finally manage to get some apathetic Iraqi policemen to search the mosque, they find bloodstains, spent bullet casings and an imam who claims to have seen and heard nothing.

On another occasion, a car is intercepted inside the Green Zone with its boot full of weapons and ammunition. It is worrying enough that uncontrolled weapons are on the move inside the allegedly secure area. Of more concern is that the car belongs to a member of the Iraqi parliament.

The US officer in charge of security for the Green Zone informs me that senior officials and elected politicians have been refusing to allow sniffer dogs to check their vehicles and that some have been caught with illicit weapons. Others have been handing out their security clearance passes to subordinates. This is a serious security risk. General Casey directs me to raise his concerns with the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Dr Mahmoud al-Mashhadani.

I drive to the Council of Representatives escorted by the US Navy SEAL team that works under my direction to protect the most senior Iraqi politicians, including the Speaker. The striking thing about the building is the number of armed men present, most of whom stare at me with open hostility. ‘They don’t like westerners coming here,’ mutters the head of the SEAL team as we walk through the cavernous foyer. ‘It’s kinda their patch, sir, you know?’

Outside the Speaker’s suite of offices we are directed to wait on some seats, along with a dozen others. One of the men also waiting looks like the clichéd swarthy Arab from central casting, with heavy-lidded eyes and a beak-like nose. He stares at me in a way that is not merely hostile but

purely hateful, and I am taken aback. Whenever I glance in his direction, that baleful glare remains fixed on me. My SEAL escort, I notice, is staring intently back at him.

When I am eventually shown into Dr Mashhadani's office there is no offer of tea, a deliberate slight. Mashhadani is a nondescript fellow with a light beard and steel-grey hair. I know him to be an ultra-conservative Sunni who was once imprisoned by the US because of his connections to a group affiliated with Al Qaeda. My attempt to open the discussion with uncontroversial topics falls flat. I then broach the subject of my visit, describing the various security breaches connected with members of the council and seek his assistance to rein in the misuse of special ID cards. The Speaker looks at me disdainfully for a few moments before beginning a long-winded rant. He is clearly no friend of the Coalition.

He says the Americans and their puppets should leave Iraq immediately. He blames the violence in his country on foreigners and Zionists, and asserts that most of the killing of Iraqi civilians is carried out by Israeli Mossad agents. I am prepared for this sort of thing; Mashhadani has made similar comments on Iraqi television, but it is still disturbing to hear it from the man controlling the business of the elected Iraqi representatives. He rattles off a long list of names of Sunnis who have disappeared and demands that I report back to him with their whereabouts. I have no hope of writing down the names, which are delivered in a torrent.

I acknowledge his concerns and point out that I am not American, and that Australia has long been a friend of Iraq. This attempt at bridge-building is scoffed at: I am a creature of the Americans and Jews, apparently. The interview is over. A short time later as I am leaving the office, Dr Mashhadani emerges to plant warm kisses on the cheeks of the waiting swarthy caricature, who favours me with one last bitter glance.

Walking out of the building, my SEAL escort says under his breath, ‘Sir, that dude who was giving you the evil eye, I know him. He was one of the guys we were hunting when I was here last year. He’s Al Qaeda, through and through.’

I reply with a rueful smile. ‘And now he’s swapping spit with the Speaker of the Council of Representatives. Democracy at work. Don’t you love it?’

When we arrive in the car park, we find the two Navy SEALs who we’d left at our vehicle have their pistols drawn. They are shouting at several Iraqi security men who have likewise drawn their sidearms and are shouting back. My escort steps in front of me and pulls me behind our armoured car.

The excitement dies down a few minutes later and everyone puts away their guns. No-one explains to me what the stand-off was about, nor do I care. We drive back to the palace. Thanks for all your fucking support, Mr Speaker, I muse.

Infuriating as such encounters are, a small sideshow to my normal work leaves a greater sense of impotence and frustration. It is the search for a young Iraqi man called Ra-eed.

The letter from Ra-eed’s father finds me by a circuitous route. He has written to General Casey, simply addressing the letter to ‘His Excellency Mister Casey, MNF-I’. It has passed through the hands of several Iraqi generals before ending up with the general.

During one of our regular meetings, General Casey hands me the letter. Written in broken English, it explains that Ra-eed was abducted by armed men back in March, along with a group from his workplace. There has been no sign of him since. Ra-eed’s father pleads that the powerful and generous American general track down the missing boy, who is his eldest and most dear son. The English is terrible but the message is heartbreaking.

Something in the father's words touches me deeply. In the midst of daily kidnappings, torture, beheadings and murder, I see a chance to correct one tiny piece of the madness. I vow to find Ra-eed.

After many misdirected phone calls I manage to speak to Ra-eed's father. It is a confused telephone conversation with many interjections from a relative living in the house who speaks some English. I explain who I am, and that General Casey has ordered me to try to find his son. This produces a wave of tearful thanks. I try to dampen his hopes, promising nothing, except that I will try.

Over the following weeks I use every spare moment to try to find Ra-eed. I call in favours from colleagues to search our database of detainees. I talk with half a dozen senior Iraqis in the Ministry of the Interior, who agree to look into it. I meet Major General Ahmed and win his promise to help; my friend the murderer is perhaps my best hope. I obtain long lists of dead Iraqis from a friend in the US Embassy who works with the Ministry of Health, which supervises Baghdad's morgues, and pore through the pages trying to find names that might match. My friend tells me that many bodies are never identified and that I'm wasting my time. She may be right, but I keep looking.

One day I get a small break. A name that is similar to Ra-eed's turns up in a list of detainees in a Ministry of the Interior lockup. The dates make it possible that it is him. I meet with General Ahmed again and he brings his influence to bear. A few days later he tells me that it is a dead end. The name is mentioned just once; there is no indication of what happened to the man being held. General Ahmed advises me to stop looking.

I continue the search on and off for several more weeks, but I find nothing new, no leads, nothing to encourage me. It is now months since Ra-eed disappeared. One day, after drawing yet another blank, I stare at the civilian casualty lists on the wall of my office and reluctantly admit to

myself that Ra-eed is probably one of the thousands of dead Iraqis represented by the charts. It is time to tell his father.

Cory arranges a meeting. He warns we could be ambushed either as part of an elaborate ploy or, more likely, through an inadvertent disclosure by Ra-eed's father. We will meet near the southern end of the 14th of July Bridge, the bridge that commemorates the founding of the Iraqi Republic. It spans the Tigris not far from the palace. The far end of the bridge is in the Red Zone. Cory and my security detail plan for a high-risk outing.

A few days later I step from one of our Humvees and enter a dilapidated shop that has been secured by my team. Ra-eed's father is there. He wears a thin shirt that was once white above dusty dark trousers. He looks to be sixty but is probably twenty years younger. He wrings his hands before him, then springs forward to grasp mine. He asks a dozen questions without pausing, leaving my interpreter to follow in his wake. All he wants to know is whether I have found his son.

I look into those dark eyes and tell him that I have searched far and wide, and that the most senior officers in the Iraqi security forces have assisted me. I briefly describe how the military and people at the US Embassy have also helped in the search. I tell him that I have tried every possible means to locate Ra-eed. Holding his hands even more tightly, I tell him that I have failed. I take a deep breath then add, 'I must tell you that I believe Ra-eed is dead.'

Ra-eed's father drops to his knees and howls in pain. His perspiring forehead is pressed to our clasped hands. He moans and weeps uncontrollably, his thin shoulders jerking up and down with each racking sob. There is nothing I can say. I stand before the counter of a shabby shop in the centre of the most deadly and blighted city in the world, where thousands are dying each month, and I am struck mute by the wretched agony of this one man, a father like myself. I feel utterly useless.

Eventually I help the grieving man to his feet and he blots his face with a handkerchief. Before we part I hand Ra-eed's father a letter, in Arabic and English, that I have written to him. That night, alone in my office in the wee hours, I email a copy of it home to Jane in an effort to explain to her the frustration and pain I am feeling. I write that even though I know Ra-eed's disappearance is just a small but sad event set against a bigger background of violence, for me it brings home the tragedy that happens here every day, and the pain that innocent families suffer.

My letter to Ra-eed's father reads as follows:

My dear Sir,

I ask that you accept my deepest respects to you and your family.

We have talked on the telephone and I have discussed with you today the sad situation involving your son Ra-eed. General Casey was deeply upset when he read your letter and he ordered that we investigate this matter as fully as possible.

It is with great sadness I tell you that, despite a thorough investigation into the kidnapping of your son on March 8, 2006, by unknown persons, we have been unable to discover what has happened to Ra-eed. We confirmed the information you provided us, about the kidnapping of many people from the Rawafid Al-Iraq Security Company. We received some information that in the middle of April a man with a name like your son's may have been held in a Ministry of the Interior detention facility, but I have not been able to confirm that information. It is possible that the information was incorrect. There has been no other information on Ra-eed's location or health since he went missing.

During the investigation, I also requested that the Ministry of Health search all their records for any information on your son in

case he was injured or ill, but I have been told there is no-one in their records that matched your son's name. We also checked all of the Coalition Forces records in case your son had somehow been detained and transferred to the Iraqi Security Forces. There is absolutely no record of Ra-eed being in the custody of the Coalition Forces, and there is no information to indicate that he was involved in any way with illegal activities that might have led to his arrest by ourselves or the Iraqi Police. Like you, I believe that your son Ra-eed was an honest and innocent Iraqi who was kidnapped through no fault of his own.

Most respected Sir, I have to tell you that I fear for the life of your son, and my heart bleeds for you and your family because of the sorrow and uncertainty about Ra-eed. I deeply regret to say I do not believe your beloved son will return to you, and that there is little else I can do to help you find Ra-eed.

Please accept my deepest sorrow at bringing you this unhappy news. I hope for the blessings of Allah (the Merciful and the Compassionate) on all your family, and especially for Ra-eed. Despite telling you, in all honesty, that I fear for Ra-eed's life, I will continue to pray for the safe return of your son.

Brigadier General John Cantwell
Director of Strategic Operations
Headquarters Multi National Force—Iraq

20

NEW PLANS AND NEAR MISSES

By mid 2006 I have a new boss and Iraq has a new prime minister.
The man to whom I directly answer is another American two-star general, David Fastabend, an engineer with a sharp mind and a dry sense of humour. From our first meeting it is clear we will work well together, and by the time we part at the end of 2006 we will be close friends. He gives me free rein in my job and in a short time we've come to an arrangement where we share our two roles between us, each supporting the other. I've never experienced a professional relationship like it, but here it works extremely well.

Nouri al-Maliki is the new prime minister. His predecessor was seen to be incapable of controlling the accelerating sectarian violence. I have met Maliki on several occasions on behalf of General Casey. Each meeting was friendly, unhurried and not particularly productive, but I have learnt not to expect too much from Iraqi politicians. His greatest weakness is his susceptibility to pressure from his Shi'a constituency.

Maliki's arrival has done nothing to quell the violence, which has generated a life of its own. It is clear that something must be done to reduce the freedom of movement of the death squads and armed gangs responsible for the killings.

Baghdad is the key. Not only is it the epicentre of the violence, it is the political and institutional nucleus of Iraq. I join planning teams from the senior Coalition combat headquarters, spending hours analysing the patterns

of the killings, the timing of vehicle-borne suicide attacks, traffic flows, weapons trafficking, mortar and rocket attacks, and a host of other factors. A plan is hatched, called Operation Together Forward, named to highlight the dual involvement of Iraqi forces and Coalition troops. Key elements are the imposition of a curfew, from 2100 to 0600 hours, more roadblocks and checkpoints, and more troops on the streets. It is launched by Prime Minister Maliki with great fanfare.

The operation fails. A month after it begins, the violence is worse. Despite the involvement of around 70,000 Iraqi and Coalition troops, who conduct thousands of patrols, man scores of checkpoints, and fight daily battles against insurgents and militia fighters, we are losing the battle for Baghdad. The Iraqi Army performs at a basic level, but many security outposts are never manned and only a third of the promised extra battalions ever arrive in the city. When we investigate we discover that a couple of battalions have been diverted to protect farms and businesses owned by Iraqi generals. The Iraqi police are hopeless; they are either incompetent or unwilling to impose order. Some are enthusiastic participants in the sectarian killing. Across Baghdad the militiamen, insurgents and thugs continue their deadly work. The curfew is routinely violated and checkpoints are porous. The carnage continues.

I attend meeting after meeting in sweltering conference rooms with well-fed, self-admiring Iraqi generals who claim to be making great progress but who are achieving fuck-all. I brief them on the lack of progress, quote growing casualty figures and point out the worst afflicted suburbs. I am greeted with nods, then silence. The American major general commanding the Baghdad security zone, a bear-like dynamo of a man named J. D. Thurman, simmers on the edge of exploding with frustration at the passive attitude of the Iraqis. He variously orders, implores and begs that they start doing what they are paid to do. He tries shaming them,

showing dozens of photographs of checkpoints with sleeping Iraqi guards or some that have been abandoned altogether. Each meeting concludes with affirmations of greatly improved performance and promises of action. Nothing changes.

I continue to travel extensively around Baghdad and to other parts of Iraq, conducting dozens of meetings with Coalition colleagues and Iraqi contacts, planning and coordinating, rebuking and encouraging, winning and losing arguments. I plan a large-scale operation to protect Iraq's oil infrastructure and pipelines from which tens of millions of dollars worth of oil is being stolen each month, some of it to fund Al Qaeda. The operation involves tens of thousands of Iraqi troops and I invest hundreds of hours in it. It fails because there's too much money being skimmed off, much of it going into the pockets of senior officials in the Ministry of Oil itself.

I throw myself into a scheme to try to restrict and control the number of weapons on the streets, based on a weapons registration scheme. For a short time it seems to be working, with thousands of licence applications and the associated fee being submitted. Then I notice that only a tiny number of official weapons permits have been issued. When I visit the office of the Iraqi officer responsible, I discover the problem. He has simply kept the fees and done nothing about the permits. He shows me a cupboard full of US dollars and offers me a bribe. When I try to have him arrested he flees, taking the money with him. In the meantime thousands of fake weapons permits are flooding the city. So much for that idea.

Summer fades to autumn and the monthly civilian casualty figure rises above 3,000 and keeps climbing. A new phase of Operation Together Forward is launched in August, with the addition of almost 12,000 Iraqi and US soldiers. The concept is to flood key neighbourhoods with troops to clear them of fighters. Once these areas have been purged, work can then

begin on rebuilding infrastructure, the delivery of basic services and creating jobs.

The clearance operations start well but it soon becomes obvious the people we are after simply melt away ahead of the advancing security forces. As new focal areas are cleared, increasing numbers of troops and police are needed to hold the areas that have been secured. In trying to strike a balance, both the clearance and holding missions end up with insufficient forces. The militiamen re-infiltrate the cleared areas, some of which now experience even worse violence. The security situation slides closer to the abyss. The words ‘civil war’ keep cropping up in the media, and we keep denying that Iraq has descended that far. It’s a game of semantics.

In between frustrating meetings with lacklustre Iraqi generals and vacillating politicians I have my share of excitement and near misses.

One day I am sitting in my office next to the open window when we hear a whistling rush. Cory, sitting at his small desk outside my door, recognises it. ‘Incoming!’ is all he has time to shout. It’s the sound of a 107-millimetre rocket, a metre-long projectile carrying a couple of kilos of high explosive, fired from the Shi’a slums of northeast Baghdad. It lands with a loud bang but no explosion a dozen metres from my office window, punching through the wall of someone’s accommodation hut before burying itself in the ground beneath the building.

We go outside to take a look, ignoring the risk of a delayed explosion. The aluminium hut, which had fortunately been empty, is pierced and gutted. Had the warhead exploded the blast and fragmentation would have flailed my office. I thank my lucky stars for the crappy quality control in whichever Soviet or Chinese arms factory that rocket was manufactured in.

On another day I am walking back from my hut with my driver, Specialist Michael Coil, an amiable giant who played pro-am football back

home in the US. Suddenly mortar rounds begin landing nearby and we both dive for the deck. There was no warning siren or announcement and we are in the open. I scrabble sideways into a shallow gutter as more rounds land, the ear-splitting explosions and buzz of shrapnel encouraging me to press myself hard into the gravel.

The bombardment stops and dust is drifting across us when I look up to see my driver lying flat on his belly, face down, with his hands grasped around a spindly sapling no more than an inch thick. ‘Coil!’ I shout. ‘Are you okay?’

His shaved cannonball head lifts to reveal a dirty face. ‘I’m fine, sir,’ he rumbles, still holding the skinny tree. The absurdity of a man weighing well upwards of 120 kilograms trying to shelter behind a tree no thicker than his thumb hits me, and for the first time in many weeks I start laughing.

My driver looks puzzled. ‘What the hell did you think you were doing hiding behind that stick, you idiot!’ I gasp, laughing so hard I’m unable to rise.

Coil hauls his massive frame upright, trying to look dignified, and dusts off the front of his uniform. The warning siren and ‘Duck and Cover’ message belatedly boom out from the compound’s speakers. I laugh even harder.

On another occasion, my phone rings and I hear the voice of an American colonel I know asking if I could pay a visit to the Iraqi river patrol he’s been training. ‘They’d be pretty excited to have a Coalition general visit them, sir,’ he says.

The trip is arranged. On the appointed day, we drive to a concrete compound on the bank of the Tigris River. The Iraqis are being trained to operate small boats so they can patrol the river and search the banks for weapons caches. I am introduced to a chubby Iraqi lieutenant colonel who proudly invites me to inspect his men and his boats.

Then he asks if I'd like to go for a boat ride. I catch the eye of the American mentor and he gives me a pleading look. 'Sure,' I say, 'I'd be honoured.'

Cory looks at me and rolls his eyes.

A few minutes later I clamber aboard a rigid-hulled inflatable boat which has a small open cockpit, a pair of massive outboard motors and machine guns mounted fore and aft. The Iraqi lieutenant colonel and I stand in the small space behind the cockpit, and brace ourselves as we glide away from the jetty, accompanied by another boat containing my American friend and Cory.

The policeman at the controls suddenly red-lines the throttle and we rocket out into the centre of the muddy river. I hang on grimly. My Iraqi host points out various spots where his men have found weapons and I nod my appreciation. At one stage we pass a body floating face down in the river; when I point it out my host looks at it briefly then shrugs. The manic cruise continues.

On the river bank I see two men, one of them with a rifle. A moment later he takes a shot at us, but the bullet appears to pass behind. There are other small puffs of smoke from the rifle. I don't know where those bullets have gone. I nudge the Iraqi commander and point to the men shooting at us. He shrugs again. A short time later another gunman takes a pot shot. The police manning the fore and aft machine guns seem to be admiring the view.

Pride demands that I stay upright. I feel like some ancient mariner, standing tall on the deck of a sailing ship to receive incoming fire. All I can think is, Get me off this damn thing.

Ahead of us looms a bridge across the river, with several men looking our way. Only a week or so earlier a group of British marines had been killed by an explosive device rigged under a bridge just like this one. I

decide we've had enough fun and prod the Iraqi officer then twirl my finger to indicate we should turn around, and he nods and shouts an order over the roaring engines.

The helmsman puts us into a violent turn at full speed. We are all thrown sideways, the chubby Iraqi cannoning into me and knocking me off my feet. I start to fall overboard, overbalanced by the force of the turn and the weight of my helmet and body armour. In desperation I fling out an arm and with sheer luck hook a metal pole in the bend of my elbow; my feet swing out and drag in the churning water until I haul myself back on board. I would have sunk like a stone.

As we race back upstream the hopeful gunmen on the bank take a few more shots. I again stand fully exposed, hoping their aim hasn't improved.

Later, back on dry land, I congratulate the Iraqi officer on his team's progress and fine watermanship, before retreating thankfully to my vehicle. As Cory is about to slam the car door behind me he says, 'Sir, let's not do that again, okay?'

I smile back at him and say, 'I think we're done with water sports, mate.'

One afternoon, when I can no longer stand the grim reports of death, I tell my staff I'm going to the gym for a short sanity break. There is some risk in this because the locals have taken to firing machine guns at an angle over the T-walls, and one of the South American door sentries was recently hit in the neck. I figure if I hug the walls and sandbagged barriers I should avoid any incoming rounds, so I jog to my hut, change quickly and dash to the gym.

Thirty minutes later I peer outside, assess that it's safe and start trotting back towards the accommodation area. On the home stretch there is a zip sound as a bullet passes my ear and smacks into the wall beside me, ricocheting down to hit the concrete before bouncing along the dusty

cement path. Without breaking my stride, I reach down to scoop up the still-warm projectile. That night I email a photo to Jane of me holding my lucky bullet, telling her that I'm safe now—the bullet meant for me has missed.

Then one day on a flight back from the northern Kurdish region, I get very lucky indeed. My visit has gone well. I have met with the commander of a Korean Army group stationed there and, incredibly, received an impromptu acupuncture treatment from a master Korean practitioner at their hospital. I have productive talks with the commanding general and staff of the US 101st Air Assault Division, also stationed nearby.

My visit to the US headquarters coincides with a memorial ceremony for four soldiers killed in the days before my arrival and I make a few remarks on behalf of General Casey. I talk about sacrifice and courage. Grief is etched on the faces of the soldiers in front of me. I talk about the immense sadness that they are feeling and how this brings home to me the very personal nature of life on a battlefield. It's a long way from the PowerPoint slides and political manoeuvrings inside the Green Zone in Baghdad.

Afterwards, the assistant commander presents me with a couple of captured weapons as souvenirs. I pass these to Cory and my security detail, then the American officer hands me one more weapon. It is a fully functioning, gold-plated AK-47 rifle, complete with the seal of Saddam Hussein embossed in the oak handgrip. He used to give them to his most favoured generals. It is a gift, I'm told, in appreciation of my words and Australia's contribution to the fight. When I protest, the gaudy weapon is pressed upon me, and that afternoon I fly out with it in my lap.

The long Black Hawk helicopter flight back to Baghdad is a noisy and vibrating torture test. A gale blows in from the open doors. I decide to briefly break regulations and remove my tight-fitting helmet to ease a splitting headache. Looking down at the desert sliding past only a couple of

hundred feet below, I notice several sparks from the ground and realise they are muzzle flashes and that we are taking ground fire.

The door gunner beside me reacts a moment later, flinging up the barrel of his machine gun and letting loose a long burst of fire. The pilot throws the helicopter violently to one side, then the other. I almost lose my helmet out the door, grabbing it as several rounds hit the airframe: *snap! snap! snap!* I sense the supersonic wake of a bullet that whips past my face as it travels right through the space between the hunched passengers. The door gunner fires again, leaning out to keep his aim as we rocket past the cluster of huts where the ground fire has come from.

The shooting stops and the crew starts chattering excitedly. The helicopter seems to be flying okay. We passengers look at each other with wide eyes. A British officer hitching a ride with us mouths the words ‘Fuck me’ then shakes his head. Belatedly, I pull my sweaty helmet back on. Great timing, dickhead, I say to myself.

When we land, one of the crew peers underneath the belly of the aircraft and points to several neat bullet holes rimmed by bright aluminium.

At the edge of the landing area I notice a group of US Air Force personnel waiting to board another chopper, their eyes on the gold-plated rifle in my hand. As we pass, one of them says, ‘Hey man, is that a gold AK-47?’

In the high of relief I feel the tickle of mischief rise in me. ‘Yeah, mate,’ I reply, holding the rifle up to let it sparkle in the sun. ‘I’m Australian. We all get issued these.’

Boarding my waiting car I hear him say to one of his buddies, ‘You hear that? Them Ossies all get gold AKs!’

What a day, I think. I have acupuncture from a Korean master, I am presented with a golden gun, my helicopter is shot up and I get to take the piss out of the US Air Force. Only in Iraq.

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One night a few weeks later, I am jolted awake by several loud explosions. In the pitch dark of my hut I sit up in bed, just in time for an even bigger and much closer detonation, which knocks me to the floor. I feel and hear items that had been on my desk or bedside table rain down around me: my alarm clock, a small radio, pens, a notebook, my pistol. Shit!

I fumble in a drawer until my fingers close on a small torch, the same one I carried with me in 1991, and click it on. I see the litter of items around me jump with yet another explosion. The siren starts to howl. I push myself sideways under the bed, only to realise that it offers no protection, so I scramble on all fours to the far corner of the room closest to the sandbagged wall outside.

I flash my torch around, looking for my helmet and body armour. They are nowhere to be seen. Oh fuck. I was so tired and muddle-headed by the time I went to bed that tonight, of all nights, I have left them in my office.

Bang! There is another explosion and my hut jumps again. Nearby I can hear people shouting.

Then an almighty detonation rips through the night and a violent shockwave bangs into the wall of the hut. Everything in my room that hadn't yet fallen to the floor does now. I try to stay calm but I'm not. For the first time in this deployment I am genuinely very frightened. I glance up at the ceiling; it is nothing more than two sheets of aluminium and some insulating foam, which an incoming rocket or mortar round won't even notice as it passes through. I shove the small bar fridge into the corner to form a small triangle space, into which I squeeze, curled in a ball.

More and more detonations come. What the fuck is going on? The loudspeakers keep wailing, 'Duck and Cover. Duck and Cover. Duck and Cover … ' I hear men running past the hut. I am swinging the torch around

looking for something to pull on top of me when, among the shambles on the floor, I notice my mobile phone, rarely used and turned off. I stare at it, then another blast splits the air, then another.

I still don't know what's going on, but it seems entirely possible that a deadly projectile will come through the thin roof above me at any time. I might not get another chance. I scramble and grab the phone, and call Jane.

She answers on the fifth ring and at first I don't know what to say. 'Honey, it's me,' is all I can manage.

'Hi, darling!' Jane replies, pleased to hear from me. I hear her speak to someone else at her end, 'It's John! What are you doing calling at this time?' she asks me. 'It must be the middle of the night at your end.'

'It is,' I answer. 'Darling, listen. I need to talk to you. I'm in my room but we're getting hit with mortars or rockets or something.'

'What? Mortars? Right now?' she says. 'Shush!' she tells the person with her at the other end. I will learn later it is her mother, whom she is visiting.

'Honey, I'm sorry to call you like this but it's a bit ugly here right now and I had a chance to call you so that's what I'm doing.' Suddenly I am stuck for words. 'I love you, darling,' I blurt.

There is a short silence, then I can tell she has started crying. 'Are you somewhere safe? Are you hurt?' she asks. Her voice is small.

'I'm okay right now, but I'm stuck in my room and there are a lot of explosions somewhere close.' At that moment another huge detonation rattles the hut. Inadvertently I say, 'Shit!'

'I heard that explosion! Oh darling, please get to somewhere safe! Please!' Jane says.

There are more explosions. 'Honey, I need to stay where I am. Just listen. I know this is an awful thing to do to you, but I just had to tell you how much I love you, and our boys, just in case. Okay?'

‘I love you too!’ she says, trying to speak normally but I can hear the tears in her voice. I feel like a cruel bastard. Why did I do this to her?

We talk for a minute longer. I realise that the detonations have petered out. I can hear raised voices not far away. ‘Darling, I have to go. The explosions have stopped. I think it’s all right but I need to see if anyone is hurt. I’m fine, okay, I’m fine,’ I tell her.

‘Be careful!’ Jane implores.

‘I promise,’ I say. ‘I need to go, baby. I’ll call you back very soon.’

I break the connection, pull on some shoes and go outside. A fire is burning about a hundred metres away. It’s in the accommodation area. I start to run.

Over the next hour the situation becomes clearer. A large number of rockets have been fired into the Green Zone, a couple of which landed in the palace compound. By another extraordinary stroke of luck they landed among several unused huts, which were the source of the fire. Several rockets have hit a huge ammunition depot nearby, starting another blaze that has ignited some of the munitions. A chain reaction has developed, with more and more high explosives detonating.

The explosions continue fitfully for hours. I am told there are several ammunition technicians unaccounted for. ‘Poor bastards,’ I say.

For no good reason, when I hear myself say these words, I am reminded of my driver from the First Gulf War, Pete, who uttered the same thing when we heard of American casualties on the first day of that war.

I find time to call Jane again and reassure her that I’m unhurt. I tell her I’m sorry I upset her unnecessarily, but she says she’s glad I called. She cries a little more, and I do too.

A couple of hours before dawn I go back to bed and try to sleep. Despite the events of the night, all I can think about is a dark desert back in 1991, falling artillery, Steve and Pete, and the mist of fear inside our wagon.

Ever since seeing the grotesque video of slaughtered American prisoners a couple of months ago, the nightmares have returned. When I eventually fall asleep, the demons arrive in force.

21

A DAY AT THE MARKET

Tiredness weighs on me like an iron coat. I've never worked such long hours for such a long period. I drink too much coffee and swill endless cans of Coke for the caffeine and sugar hit. I see the same weariness on the faces of my colleagues. Wide yawns and occasional micro-sleeps are ignored; we are all chronically sleep-deprived.

Some nights I drop like a dead man to wake in the same position, stiff from the lack of movement. But on many nights I toss and turn, tortured by memories, or simply unable to relax as one insoluble problem after another tumbles through my mind. I feel a growing sense of anger at the incompetence and bias of the Iraqi politicians and generals. I find myself blaming ordinary Iraqis for the calculated callousness on display every day, even though I know most are hapless victims trapped in the mayhem. But some of them have a talent for terror. Brutal torture is expertly administered. Murder is routine. Death swarms like the flies on the stinking piles of rubbish in every street.

The Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government is increasingly reluctant to allow operations targeting Shi'a militia, despite the dreadful carnage. This is particularly so when we go after militia strongmen or insurgent leaders in Shi'a suburbs or towns. I spend hours in the office of the prime minister or his national security adviser justifying proposed missions to capture or kill mass murderers—backed with evidence such as telephone intercepts or aerial photographs. They impose more and more restrictions, to the point of

making some missions unviable. Yet if I seek approval to go after a Sunni insurgent, I barely get my request out before I am given the go-ahead. The barefaced double standards are initially shocking but so common I become immune to them.

One evening I spend half an hour struggling to obtain permission from the prime minister to raid a torture chamber and killing shop in the Shi'a enclave of Sadr City. When this is reluctantly granted, I point to another folder and say, 'Excellency, I have here another proposed mission, in Ahmadiyah.' Ahmadiyah is a Sunni neighbourhood on the east bank of the Tigris. 'Do you wish to review it?' I ask, not even reaching for the folder.

Prime Minister Maliki shakes his head. 'No, go ahead,' says his translator.

I rise and farewell my host with one of my stock Arabic phrases, '*Tisbah ala-kheir, sayedi*,' I say, 'Goodnight, sir,' and am favoured with a soft handshake and a small smile. I know that legally, and morally, the prime minister should have reviewed the attack on the Sunni house. We should have discussed it. It will probably end in several deaths. I'm complicit in all of this, I think. I feel compromised and dirty. The stench of this place has penetrated my soul.

The beheadings continue, but now there's a twist: both sides start leaving the severed heads in one place and the bodies in another—occasionally notes are placed in their mouths with threats or denouncements in a macabre form of advertising. With the head in one location and the body in another, relatives are forced to play a ghastly game of mix and match before a funeral can take place.

Sunni insurgents continue with what they see as the main game: killing as many infidel invaders as possible. IEDs, improvised explosive devices, are the weapon of choice. As the summer heat starts to fade, the number of

IED attacks keeps rising, passing 5,000 a month. Thousands more are found before they can be detonated.

A new and deadly variation on the standard IED has become prevalent —explosively formed projectiles, or EFPs. These are nothing more than a tube, usually a piece of metal pipe around 20 or 30 centimetres in diameter, filled with high explosive. One end of the tube has a dish-like concave plate fitted, usually copper but sometimes steel. When the charge is detonated, the massive pressure inverts the concave plate, creating a heavy slug of metal that is projected at tremendous speed.

The sheer energy of this metallic projectile is extraordinary; it will penetrate many centimetres of the hardest armour plate. EFPs are killers. They punch through the sides of armoured personnel carriers and tanks. Humvees, even with additional heavy side armour, are no match. As the semi-molten metal smashes through the armour, it splatters apart, creating a hail of high-velocity projectiles inside the vehicle. Although they represent only a small fraction of all IED attacks, a third of all casualties are now caused by EFPs.

Sunni extremists also continue to kill their fellow countrymen. There are more suicide bombers attacking Shi’a communities or the Iraqi security forces, often under the direction of Al Qaeda. The head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was killed in June. I’d watched combat camera video, cheering along with the others gathered around the flickering monitor as American F-16s dropped two precision-guided 500-pound bombs on the house that US Special Forces had tracked him to. I was responsible for recovering Zarqawi’s body, along with the six others also killed in the air strike; they included one of his wives and their child. I didn’t feel like cheering about that. I was responsible for coordinating the autopsy that confirmed Zarqawi’s identity and for the disposal of his remains in a secret location. Killing Zarqawi is a temporary victory,

however, because he is replaced almost immediately by his Egyptian deputy, Abu al-Masri.

Abu al-Masri doesn't waste time. Almost thirty suicide attacks in July kill more than 250 people and maim hundreds more. Over the course of the following three months, suicide bombers claim an average monthly toll of 150 Iraqis. Most of the bombers are foreigners, recruited predominantly from Saudi Arabia but with a scattering of Jordanians, Syrians, Kuwaitis and others. Some are women. Not all of them are trusted to follow through—troops arriving at the scene of some atrocities find severed hands handcuffed to the steering wheel of the suicide car.

Both sides increasingly rely on snipers, especially in the dense urban battlefield of Baghdad. When I arrived there were a dozen sniper attacks per month; now that figure has tripled. Grotesque videos appear on jihadist websites showing US soldiers being killed by snipers. Someone thinks it's a good idea to show these to us 'so we know what we're up against'. I get to watch the videos on the big screen in the Operations Centre and see snipers' bullets dropping men in the turrets of armoured vehicles, or standing next to a truck, or patrolling a street. One graphic clip shows a close-up of a young soldier glancing left and right, his lips moving as he speaks into a small microphone. The bullet hits him square in the face, smashing his head backwards in a red mist of blood.

One day I get to witness the carnage first hand.

The ineffectiveness of the clearance operations has led me to champion another idea: walled enclaves. The concept is that if we can slow the cycle of reprisals, we might have a chance to bring the violence under control. This might be achieved by erecting T-walls around the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. There'll be just a couple of exit and entry points, to be supervised by Coalition troops. Patrols and checkpoints will guard the approaches to the enclaves. It sounds deceptively simple and at first I have

trouble convincing anyone it’s worth trying. But General Chiarelli eventually agrees and we run a trial.

A suburb is selected and the T-walls go in. A week later the signs are promising and I arrange to visit the area to talk to the locals and gauge their reactions. I meet up with a combat patrol from the US 4th Infantry Division inside the IZ. I am handed a fire-resistant hood and gloves like a Formula One driver, to try to reduce the burns that accompany IED attacks. I shove foam plugs in my ears to lessen the chance of deafness. My helmet, body armour and ballistic goggles complete the ensemble. As I take my place in the right rear seat of a heavily armoured Humvee, the gunner leans down from his turret in the roof and shows me where the ammunition is stowed, telling me to keep feeding it up to him if we get in a fight. ‘No problem,’ I say. ‘Take as much as you like.’ With four other Humvees we roll out into the suburbs of Baghdad.

We set off for the disturbingly named Shi’a suburb of Jihad and after a time we leave the main roads behind and thread our way through narrow streets of shops and crowded houses. Through thick bulletproof glass I see people picking their way past heaped garbage that covers almost every footpath. There hasn’t been a functioning waste-collection service in Baghdad for months—every time we organise a new fleet of trucks the drivers get shot and the trucks get blown up. Vacant patches of land now fester under steaming mounds of rubbish, swarming with flies and picked over by dogs. Bodies are dumped in some and the dogs gnaw at them too.

The other public utility that isn’t working is the sewerage system. This relies on electrical power to run the pumps and to open sluice gates. But the power in Baghdad continues to be fitful, only working for a couple of hours a day due to constant attacks on power pylons and electrical plants, as well as incompetent Iraqi engineers who keep frying the expensive generators installed by the Americans. The whole system of utilities—power,

sewerage, railways, oil infrastructure, ports, roads, you name it—is falling apart, victim of decades of shoddy maintenance and the current chaos. In the case of the sewerage system, the worn-out components and power shortages have produced an accumulation of raw effluent that floods the pipelines, fills the overflows, and wells up to run along the gutters and streets. In some areas the sewage gathers into pools and lakes of disgusting grey-brown soup, lumpy with faeces and other unidentifiable filth. The militiamen sometimes dump bodies here too, along the edge, so that anyone recovering them must wade in.

We pass one of these disgusting lakes, covering a couple of acres of low-lying ground, then drive through streets awash in the stuff. The stink of it fills our Humvee and makes me gag. I push my *shemagh* higher on my face but the stench is unstoppable. I can taste shit. The US vehicle ahead of us creates a small wake of effluent, which slops over the gutters and onto the footpaths, where groups of Iraqis stand watching us. Small shops and stalls line the streets, selling cheap-looking household items. Dotted among the stores are grimy repair sheds, open-air barber shops and butchers with hunks of meat hanging in the open. Roadside vendors hawk fruit and flat bread and push their worn carts past rotting waste and through puddles of sewage. This is life for many Iraqis.

We clear the cesspool and drive on to our destination, a residential area with slightly less rubbish. Here we stop and get out of the Humvees to gather some distance away from the stinking residue on the wheels and mudguards. I realise that I stand out like a sore thumb. The Americans are dressed identically in grey-green camouflage uniforms, all with M4 rifles. I carry only a pistol on my hip and my Australian uniform is a yellowish tan blotched with dark brown, perhaps one of the ugliest and least effective camouflage patterns worn by any combatant in Iraq. I joke with my US colleagues that it was designed by Stevie Wonder, the blind singer-

songwriter. Cory and another American infantryman hover nearby, weapons ready, clearly in a protective posture. I feel a tightening of the skin between my eyes. If I were a sniper surveying our little group, I know who I'd shoot.

I am introduced to a community elder, who preens himself when I refer to him as 'Sheikh'. The T-walls have reduced the number of drive-by shootings and kidnappings, I'm told, but the locals don't much like being penned in. Mortar bombs and grenades have been lobbed over the walls, but after much discussion it is agreed that the trial should continue for a few more weeks.

I am invited to walk the street to see some repair work that the Coalition should do. In the course of this tour I have an uplifting encounter with two boys on dilapidated pushbikes. The boys have decorated their bikes and proudly show me how they've repaired them with wire and bits of metal pipe. I am offered some fruit by a dirty vendor displaying goods well past their prime: I peel a blackened banana and swallow the brown mushy fruit. I am smiling in appreciation when the bomb goes off.

The explosion is maybe 500 metres away and it's a big one—it's the unmistakable thump of military-grade high explosive. The pressure wave gently buffets us seconds after the sound. Above the rooftops I see a ball of black smoke from which pieces of debris spin and fall. It's a car bomb.

'Let's get there, now!' I tell my escort. One of their radios is already squawking. I hurriedly shake hands with the sheikh and we dash back to our vehicles. We race through the narrow streets beyond the T-wall then find that a deep drain is blocking the direct route across an open field.

'We'll walk from here,' says the patrol commander. We pile out and clamber down and through the crap and corruption in the bottom of the ditch and out the other side. Halfway across the field we are met by a group of distraught women, some dragging children by the hand. Several of them have blood on their hands and faces.

The women plead and point to the smoke. One of the American officers gets caught in a confused exchange with a woman, who wails that we should have prevented the attack. ‘Let’s go!’ I urge, and we press on. We cross a sandy wasteland and arrive at a market square.

It is a bloody mess.

There is no reticulated gas system in Baghdad. Weekly markets like this one are where the women come to exchange empty gas bottles for full ones, to use in their kitchen stoves. A tractor has pulled a large trailer stacked with gas bottles into the centre of the square. Now the tractor sits lopsided and blackened while its trailer lies smashed against a wall with a few charred gas bottles still trapped in the twisted wreckage. The remnants of the car that carried the IED sit nearby, where a man stands playing a hose over the smouldering wreckage. The collection of old artillery shells and explosives that was the car’s cargo has blown the rear end to fragments, leaving only the back axle attached to the deformed chassis. The naked metal framework and exposed interior makes it look like the picked-over carcass of some large animal. Despite the many minutes that have now elapsed since the blast there is still an acrid stink of cordite in the air, mingled with the smell of blood.

Scattered around the square are the victims of the blast, living and dead. There is a line of corpses neatly arranged on one side of the square where some locals are placing another obviously dead woman into line with the others. They lie partly covered by bloody shawls or blankets, their shoeless feet pointing skywards. There are several small forms among the dozen or so inert shapes; the bodies of children.

The locals seem to know the clean-up drill. Crying kids are being gathered up by women. Three small vans, the vehicles of bakers or repairmen, are already being loaded with wounded survivors. They are carried roughly by inexpert hands, their limbs flopping and their heads

lolling as they are lifted into the vans with much shouting and gesturing. One of the loaded vans roars off with two men standing at the open side door, waving people out of the way and calling a warning ahead, like a human siren.

The wounds are awful. One woman has a leg missing. An inadequate tourniquet has been applied and bright red blood spurts from the stump. When one of the Americans tries to help he is waved away by the men hauling her into one of the vans. I doubt she'll survive the ride to the hospital. Another woman groans loudly as she is heaved in beside her, her forearm wrapped in a crimson rag where her hand has been ripped off. Her face is pocked with shrapnel wounds. An ambulance appears and it is mobbed by the walking wounded and a man carrying a crumpled woman.

The American in charge of our patrol is calling for assistance while the remaining soldiers secure the area. We are vulnerable here, on foot in a hostile part of the city surrounded by shocked and angry people. Part of me realises we should be taking precautions, but I am transfixed by the carnage. Many of the injured women and children are almost naked, their clothes torn to threads or ripped from them by the blast. They have terrible burns and pink flesh is visible beneath flaking and charred skin. Women and children are wailing and their sooty faces are streaked with tears. The badly injured are very quiet, and sit in a stunned silence, overcome by shock and pain. I know if I try to help one of these women it will create uproar, possibly even a gunfight. Infidels don't touch Muslim women, not even dying ones. I stand helpless, impotent and angry.

The chaotic evacuation of the wounded continues as more cars arrive to be loaded with bleeding, crying women. Men are starting to pick up the pieces of broken stalls and the scattered gas bottles littering the sides of the square. The amateur fireman has stopping spraying the wreckage of the car bomb and I walk over to it, peering inside for signs of a suicide driver.

There are none. The man with the hose says the driver walked away from the car shortly before it exploded—a coward as well as a murderer, I think. He must have seen the market was packed with women and children; indeed, that's probably why it was targeted.

Away from the gutted car I notice for the first time just how much blood there is. There are puddles of it everywhere, connected by little rivulets. I look down to find I am standing in one of the pools of dark blood. There are a couple of severed fingers near my feet, partly submerged. 'Jesus,' I mutter as I look for a piece of dry ground.

Cory walks with me to the edge of the square. 'Pretty ugly, sir,' he says.

'Sure is,' are the only words I can manage.

We pass a shattered shop then move along a faded yellow wall scarred by flying debris. It has a huge spray of blood across it. Lower down the wall is a gory splatter of lumpy grey-red material that could be anything, probably brain matter. I stare transfixed by this for a moment before I see a pair of sandals nearby. They are a small pair of pink sandals, a couple of metres apart on the ground below the blood-splattered wall. One of them lies on its side but the other one is floating in a puddle of blood. A cartoon character is printed on the cheap vinyl material of the cross-strap. The sandal rotates slowly in the thickening blood, moved by a breeze.

The little girl must have accompanied her mother to the market. She was standing next to the wall when the bomb exploded. A ghastly imprint of her little body is now stencilled on the wall.

I know Cory has a little girl: he has a picture of her on his desk. I know he'd be thinking of her now. We stand numbed for a few moments, before I say, 'Let's get away from here.' We walk across the square, where more US soldiers and some Iraqi police have now arrived. Our Humvees have also turned up.

On one side of the square stands an imposing house that is undergoing renovations. The blast has broken or cracked every window. A man emerges from the house, wearing a purple pullover that barely contains his bulging paunch. He is the owner and he begins abusing me in reasonable English. He wants to know where we were when the cowardly terrorists brought the car bomb to the market. He points to the broken windows and chipped stonework of his house, demanding that he be compensated for the damage we failed to prevent.

He shows me inside the front room, where glass shards have been driven into the far wall like daggers. ‘Who will pay for this?’ he asks, waving his arms to take in the damage.

I look back to the bloodied square, feeling sick in my stomach. The anger welling in me suddenly surfaces. ‘What about all the women and children who were just killed and wounded?’ I snap.

He huffs out a breath and flips a hand dismissively. ‘They are just women,’ he says, then turns away.

I stand stunned, hardly believing what I’ve just heard. The wailing of the wounded fills my ears.

Later that day, I find a tap near my hut and scrub the blood and shit off my boots. As I’m scrubbing I realise that, like the hand of the soldier buried alive in the southern desert of Iraq in 1991, the Jihad marketplace will stay with me for the rest of my life. I know with a resigned certainty that the sight of those bloodied pink sandals, and the little girl who wore them, will forever lurk in my dreams.

22

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Only once do I have to clean blood from my boots. Mostly I participate vicariously in the violence: it's beamed into our headquarters on live data link—death via video.

The downing of any Coalition aircraft will often be broadcast on the big screens in the Operations Centre. As soon as I get news of a crashed helicopter or jet, I convene a crisis response team to compile what we know. Digital maps are displayed on one of the screens showing where the aircraft has gone down and the locations of nearby friendly units. Urgent orders are issued to get at least one airborne surveillance drone positioned, which beams live images of the crash site onto another screen. The closest ground units are mobilised. Combat aircraft or armed drones join the mix, in case there is a need to defend escaping airmen. As insurance, I also activate the hostage recovery team.

Such an event unfolds one afternoon northwest of Baghdad in the barren and hostile province of Al Anbar. An F-16 jet is bombing ground targets, supporting combat troops, when it crashes. Within minutes the screens show its location. The camera of an unarmed surveillance drone zooms in and out searching the area until we locate the aircraft. Initially all I see is a blackened ellipse; then the drone's cameras zoom in and parts of the aircraft are visible, scattered outwards from the centre of the scorched and smoking point of impact. I make out a section of the tail, or possibly a wing. There are no signs of the pilot or a parachute.

We get confirmation that Coalition ground units are heading towards the crash site from several directions, and we digitally track their movement on the maps. The drone's camera pans and starts checking for the approach of potential threats. A white pickup truck comes into view, racing along a track with a trail of dust behind it. The camera zooms in and I see men in the back, several of them holding weapons.

An armed drone, a 'Predator', is also now in the vicinity. On another screen I watch as its operator rotates the camera pod to check if the Predator's weapons are properly mounted. Two Hellfire missiles hang from the rails. The camera swings again and the Predator's feed switches to targeting mode; the image is overlaid with crosshairs and blocks of rapidly changing numbers showing location, altitude, speed, weapons status and other information. The Predator locates the pickup truck, which is still heading at high speed towards the crash site. Another pickup truck has also been seen; both are converging on the charred patch of desert where the F-16 went down.

More orders flash across the command and control networks and authority is issued to hit the pickups. Officers from other wings of the palace begin filtering in on hearing a jet has crashed. The room is soon packed. I stand in the front row of desks, holding one phone while speaking into another. All eyes are on the first white pickup as it bumps along the rutted road to the crash site. The image is remarkably clear; I can make out four men in the back as they crane forward to try to be first to see the downed jet. The crosshairs are locked on the pickup and a letter 'L' starts blinking in the bottom right of the Predator screen—a laser is being fired at the target.

I stop talking on the phone. There is a sense of great excitement in the room—the hunt is on. The other officers gathered behind me are mesmerised by the drama. Someone mutters, 'Shoot, man, shoot!' The

truck hits a bump and the men in the back are bounced about, grabbing at each other to stop themselves from falling out. The laser stays locked on. The missile is on its way.

Suddenly the truck disappears in a flash of light and a cloud of smoke and dust. Bits of truck and human figures fly outwards. A loud throaty cheer erupts from the crowd in the Operations Centre. Beside me I hear a woman shout, ‘Die, you bastards!’ and I glance sideways to see one of my staff—a pleasant, competent officer who has in the past wistfully shown me photos of her husband and kids back home—standing with her fists clenched, chin up to stare at the huge screen, eyes shining with excitement, grinning in triumph. Shouts fill the room. There are more cheers when the shattered wreckage of the truck comes cartwheeling out of the dust cloud.

The Predator pans rapidly to find the other truck. Within seconds the laser fires to lock on to the target. Another missile is fired. This truck explodes too, pieces scattering in all directions. There are more cheers.

But there are no more Predators nearby and our ground troops are still miles away. Other civilian vehicles are moving towards the area. All we can do is watch as they arrive at the crash area. A small crowd gathers around the wreckage while others pick at pieces of the aircraft scattered nearby. One of the larger pieces looks like an ejection seat, but there are no parachute lines or canopy. One of the men starts pulling at something attached to the seat. It’s a body, the pilot’s. It’s like watching a molestation. I tell the operator to shut off the public video, leaving only the operations team’s screens active.

Within hours, grainy video emerges on the usual jihadist websites showing chanting insurgents jumping up and down on a bent piece of wing. The terribly disfigured body of the pilot is also displayed. I am obliged to watch the footage multiple times, trying to confirm that the remains are those of the missing pilot.

Another time an Apache helicopter is shot down in a sophisticated anti-aircraft ambush by Iraqi militants south of Baghdad, using heavy-calibre cannons and machine guns. The search and rescue team finds no bodies, although the forward part of the cockpit has been driven a metre or two into the ground by the force of the impact—it's likely the remains of the co-pilot/gunner are intermingled with the compressed and buried wreckage.

Later, insurgent video claiming to be from the aftermath of the crash shows armed men pulling a dismembered body out of some fiery wreckage. The body has limbs missing and is a bloody lump that is dragged across the ground, still burning. I review the video time and time again, trying to confirm whether it is real. There is a fleeting glimpse of white beneath the stained and bloodied uniform of the dead man. I ask for a still image of the moment. The flash of white is his underwear and it is just possible to make out the word 'Hanes' on the waistband.

Someone checks the personal lockers of the two missing crewmen; the pilot wears Hanes underwear. The video isn't a fake. I brief General Casey and an official announcement is made. Eight other aircraft go down during my time in Iraq—more death via video.

One day the death that I watch unfolding on the big screens is a direct result of a decision that I have made.

The major highway running north to south through Iraq is called Route Tampa. It is the main supply route, or MSR, along which the majority of convoys travel, hauling fuel, water, ammunition, rations, spares, replacement weapons, mail and the whole panoply of military necessities. Route Tampa is a vital artery for the war, carrying more than a thousand trucks a day. When it is closed by an insurgent attack or a major pile-up, everyone is tense until the convoys are rolling again. The insurgents also know how important the MSR is, and it is high on their list of targets for roadside bombs and ambushes. The same goes for the lesser supply routes

that connect Route Tampa to the many bases and combat outposts scattered around Iraq.

The work to keep these routes clear of IEDs is a constant battle. Clearance teams make multiple runs along the highways in huge armoured trucks decked with sensing equipment, bulldozer blades and industrial-strength blowers to blast away rubbish that might conceal a bomb. But there are only so many teams available. Each day decisions are made to prioritise where these teams are to be deployed.

On this day, like so many others, there are competing demands. Two officers come to me with requests for a clearance team. One wants to check an important supply route that is cleared regularly but not daily. The other is sending a patrol down a minor road that hasn't been used by Coalition vehicles for some time. There is a water point at the end of the road, and the engineers want to reopen it to supply water to the local village and farmers —it's seen as an important step to win over the locals who have shown some resistance to insurgents.

There is a stand-off between the officers, and I am required to adjudicate. I weigh up the risks and benefits of both and ask if there's a way to get both jobs done, on different days or with different clearance teams. For various reasons, there isn't. I make a decision: the counter-IED clearance team will work on the main supply route; that means the patrol down the minor road to the water point will go without any support.

I make decisions like this all the time; it's no big deal. On the day of the two missions I walk into the Operations Centre and have the staff call up the battle maps for the two areas. There is no video feed, but I don't need that. I watch the icon depicting the clearance team as it slowly creeps along the supply route. On another screen, a small blue icon shows the patrol as it moves down the road leading to the abandoned water point. The military

symbol indicates it comprises a dozen soldiers in three Humvees, and no IED clearance team. They are making reasonable progress. So far, so good.

Then a message comes in: the patrol is in contact. ‘What sort of contact?’ I ask the operations officer at his desk. An ambush, perhaps?

‘Dunno sir, stand by,’ he says as he grabs a phone.

I soon find out the lead vehicle has been struck by an IED—a deadly EFP, explosively formed projectile. Three men in the Humvee are dead and the other is in a bad way.

I look at the blinking icon on the big screen. It gives away nothing of the violence that has just taken place on a small side road in central Iraq. It tells nothing of the searing bolt of supersonic, semi-fluid metal that punched through the side of the Humvee, bursting into the interior in the form of multiple slugs of white-hot metal and chunks of armour torn from the vehicle’s door. The icon speaks nothing of the brutal force of those flying metallic pellets as they slashed through flesh, shattered bones and gutted the men seated inside, killing them in an instant. It doesn’t know that the gunner, standing up in the turret, has probably just lost his legs.

The icon just keeps blinking at me. Three young men are now dead, and another will live his life crippled if he doesn’t die. I made the decision that led to this moment. I killed those men.

I walk out of the Operations Centre without speaking. I think I might throw up.

‹ ›

Late one afternoon I drive across the IZ to where Prime Minister Maliki keeps an office. I am meeting him to discuss some new initiative to quell the violence or seek his concurrence to go after a Shi’a militia chief or some other proposal likely to lead nowhere. These meetings have become

increasingly fruitless. Maliki is a reasonable man, and I sense that he might one day become an effective leader, but right now he shows his partisan leanings too often, and deludes himself that he can control the dangerous and very clever Muqtada al-Sadr.

My armoured car has the ex-footballer Specialist Coil at the wheel, but my regular aide Cory is on leave and I have a stand-in, a young US Navy officer named Lieutenant Stein. As we drive into the complex, we get the usual once-over from the guards. It is repeated as we enter the more heavily restricted prime ministerial compound. Eventually we are waved through.

Specialist Coil swings the vehicle around the side of the large quadrangle inside the walled compound and halts opposite the entrance to the prime minister's suite of offices. As always, I leave my helmet, body armour and pistol in the car. I take the concrete steps to a landing outside the doorway, which is made to look more impressive by the addition of a red carpet and metal poles joined by velvet ropes. It makes the place look like the entrance to a strip joint, but the Iraqis like it, apparently. At the end of the red carpet I greet two armed sentries with another of my few Arabic phrases, '*As-Salamu Alaykum*,' or 'Peace be upon you.' I receive a wish of peace in return. I pass through the doorway with Stein at my heels.

Inside, the foyer is crowded with Iraqis in a mix of uniforms and ill-fitting suits, all talking at once. I am the only Coalition officer, although I spot another westerner in the crowd, probably a foreign diplomat. A soldier at a desk is fielding questions from half a dozen men at once while a tired-looking Iraqi woman at another desk is likewise besieged. Through the throng I spot one of the PM's senior assistants, a middle-aged woman who always treats me with formal courtesy. I tell Lieutenant Stein to wait before turning to weave my way through the crowd to speak to her.

The assistant recognises me and listens while I explain that I have a meeting arranged with the prime minister. She smiles and says, 'Of course,'

gesturing me towards a pair of heavy doors that I know lead to a waiting room for favoured guests. At the door a beefy security guard with an earpiece eyes me suspiciously before the prime minister's assistant clears the way with a graceful hand gesture.

After about ten minutes the assistant returns to tell me there will be a delay before the prime minister can see me. This is normal procedure for Iraq, where powerful men are subjected to an endless stream of supplicants and lobbyists who pull political or family favours to gain access at no notice. The hubbub I've just seen in the foyer is that process in action. I ask how long it might be before I might see His Excellency. 'I'm not sure, but soon.' It is the standard answer. I could be here for hours.

I rise and push through one of the heavy doors to the foyer, indicating to the thick-set security guard that I'll be right back by pointing at my watch and holding up one finger. He nods. If anything, the numbers in the foyer have increased, along with the noise and pervading body odour. I am looking for Lieutenant Stein. I can't see him, so I work my way around the edge of the room.

I've still not found him by the time I reach the door, so I walk outside. I look around and then walk down the steps to stand in the open. I can see my car parked on one side of the square, with Coil waiting near the door. Good man, I think. Still, no Stein. I am turning to head back inside when the 107-millimetre rockets arrive.

I have the briefest glimpse of two grey streaks in the sky, each tipped by a dark blur. I notice Coil starting to dive forward. Then there are two deafening explosions: *Wham!* Then again: *Wham!* The second rocket lands somewhere close. A slap of hot gas hurtles me through the air and smashes me into the concrete stairs, hard, on my right shoulder. I tumble along the landing for a couple of metres, thinking nothing, just feeling the bumps as I bounce along. I come to rest on my side with my ears ringing. I don't feel

any pain, just vague. I look at my arms, which seem okay except that the right arm is numb. I check my torso and finally my legs. No blood. My legs work. That's good. I lie there for a moment longer.

Suddenly my dreamlike reverie stops and I am thinking clearly again. Fuck! We just got hit by fucking rockets! The words burst into my mind and I sit up.

I see Coil pick himself up and wrench open the car door before scrambling inside. I think I hear the engine start up. Thankfully, he's okay. Where the hell is Stein?

I get to my feet. The guards at the door are still lying on their stomachs, terrified. I give one of them a thumbs-up sign, and he nods uncertainly. Shrapnel has gouged the masonry on one side of the entrance. Broken glass is falling from a window somewhere. Some more men, Iraqi soldiers, are spread-eagled off to one side. Someone is running towards them. Smoke is billowing from the corner of the adjacent building, where the first rocket landed. A fire is taking hold. More dark smoke is coming from across the other side of the compound, just beyond the wall. That's where the second rocket went. I notice that a siren is wailing. I realise that there could be more rockets coming this way.

I stride past the guards back into the foyer, which is now in a state of bedlam with everyone jabbering at the tops of their voices. Some are on the floor and some are standing, others are crouching behind chairs. I wade into the crowd, still looking for Stein. I'm angry now. The adrenaline is kicking in.

'Sir! Sir! Are you all right?' says Stein, popping up beside me. An ashen-faced Coil is standing behind him.

'Stein!' I say in exasperation. 'Where the fuck have you been?'

'Looking for you, sir!' he says, his voice a little ragged.

This is not what he signed up for when he volunteered to stand in as my aide. I try to calm down. I still have to shout to make myself heard above the noise. ‘Okay, okay. I’m fine, I just bruised my shoulder. Are you guys all right?’

They are both uninjured. ‘We really should get out of here, sir,’ rumbles Coil. ‘There could be more rockets.’

Stein asks, ‘Do you want to leave, sir?’

I look around. No-one inside seems to be hurt. The hysteria is dying down a little. There haven’t been any more rockets, and there probably won’t be any more today. I can hear helicopters above and the sound of an approaching fire engine. I ponder whether to try to keep my appointment with the prime minister. This shit happens all the time, I think. I need to see Maliki and it’ll take days to get another appointment.

‘I’ll stay, and try to get the meeting done,’ I tell my guys. ‘Coil, keep the vehicle right outside in case we need to leave in a hurry. Don’t take any arguments. Stein, you wait, right here,’ I say, pointing at my feet. I get a synchronised ‘Yes, sir’ from them both.

By the time I get to see Maliki, an hour later, the numbness in my shoulder has given way to a deep, throbbing pain. I have trouble moving my arm to pull my notebook from the side pocket of my trousers. I finish the meeting and suppress a grunt of pain as we shake hands. Today, I am thankful for his girly grasp.

Back in my office I tell Stein to write up Coil for the US Combat Action Badge to recognise that he’s been under enemy fire. The rocket hit just 40 metres from him but the sheer speed of the missile as it struck threw the shrapnel and most of the blast away from him. He’s a lucky man. Not everyone was so lucky; two Iraqis were killed and six were wounded in the attack. In addition to reports to MNF headquarters, I send a short email to the Australian national headquarters at Camp Victory, telling them I’ve had

a near miss and that I'm okay apart from bruising. I get a two-word response: take care.

Over the next few days my shoulder gets worse. I can hardly move it and the pain extends right down my arm. Painkillers barely take the edge off it. Coil drives me around to the American combat surgical hospital. This is where the seriously wounded are brought to be stabilised and sent onwards, sometimes to a huge US military hospital in Germany, sometimes straight home to the US. The aero-medical evacuation helicopters deliver their cargoes of torn-up soldiers at all hours of the night and day. My hut lies right under the final approach to the landing pad, and there are few nights when a Black Hawk doesn't sweep past just above my roof, rattling everything in the room. I don't mind; each time I make a fervent wish that the badly wounded men lying in the back of the helicopter will survive.

I am waiting near the reception bay of the hospital to see a doctor when the clatter of blades announces the arrival of another helicopter. Medical staff grab trolleys and head outside. A few minutes later they are back, their trolleys laden with two men still in their combat uniforms. Both are covered in blood. One has his leg missing below the knee. The upper torso and head of the other is a mess of blood and bandages. One of the medical staff is leaning over him, pumping his chest to keep his heart going. The gory procession passes by then disappears behind swinging doors leading to the trauma bay, leaving a thin trail of bloody spots on the floor.

I'm standing here with a sore shoulder, I think. Pathetic. I turn and leave the hospital. Back in my office I swallow more painkillers and get back to work.

I don't realise yet that the bones in my shoulder have been crushed inwards, impinging on the joint in two places. I won't know the extent of the damage until I get back to Australia in a couple of months' time. Before

then, I’ll get to explore the limits of my tolerance for pain as well as sleep deprivation.

23

GOODBYE IRAQ

October is full of ugly numbers. For the first time the monthly tally of US soldiers killed is over 100. Iraqi policemen and soldiers are likewise frequent victims of suicide bombings. But it is, of course, the citizens of Iraq who bear the brunt—100 civilians die *every single day.*

Sectarian cleansing is in full swing across Baghdad as previously mixed suburbs become increasingly dominated by either Shi'as or Sunnis. The majority of once-mixed suburbs east of the Tigris River are now almost entirely Shi'a, while predominantly Sunni areas on the western edge of the city have swelled to accommodate the influx of people forced from their homes. In some areas where the sectarian cleansing has been most virulent, the violence plummets simply because there's hardly anyone left from the opposing sect to kill. At least a million Iraqis have been forcibly displaced within the country and a further 800,000 have left Iraq altogether, mostly to Jordan, Iran or Syria.

One Monday morning sixty bodies are found on the streets of Baghdad. I spend a despairing day exhorting police and generals to take action, to no avail. Throughout the day, I wage twin battles to contain bitter frustration and to ignore the pain in my right shoulder and arm. I pop painkillers like M&Ms. That night I work into the early hours, developing a plan for an Iraqi three-star general to present to the prime minister. It is my 209th day in Iraq and my fiftieth birthday. Crappy birthday to me.

The next day I sit at the end of a long table in Prime Minister Maliki's office and listen as the general spruiks bullshit about how he has worked on this plan for days. Along with the self-congratulations he takes time to criticise the Coalition for not doing enough and not taking the problems seriously. He also tells the prime minister about the difficulties he's had getting support from me. He delivers this in Arabic, but my interpreter, his eyes downcast, dutifully translates. Part of me is glad I've left my pistol in the vehicle.

The meeting drones on. Tea is served in delicate gold-rimmed glasses. As we sit there deciding nothing, a further fifty bound and tortured bodies are being pulled out of drains and dumps across Baghdad.

My cynicism is cemented by an event in mid-October. I spend most of the night in the operations room monitoring a long-awaited Special Forces raid to capture a truly evil bastard called Mazen al-Sa'edi, one of the most powerful, ruthless and effective death squad commanders. He is also closely linked to powerful Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. We have been after him for months. Finally, we have enough information to arrest him and have solid information on his location. The raid is a great success and the transmission of the codeword for his capture—'Jackpot'—produces high fives all around the Republican Palace.

The sense of satisfaction, the glimmer of hope that we might be making some minute progress, is short-lived. The day after the raid, Prime Minister Maliki orders the immediate release of Sa'edi. General Casey and the US ambassador argue vehemently to hold him. Maliki refuses to listen. The reason is obvious: Muqtada al-Sadr has been on the phone. In a final humiliation for the Coalition, Sa'edi is delivered to one of Sadr's offices by a Ministry of the Interior convoy to be welcomed by supporters cheering their man and jeering the Coalition.

That same day, another ten US soldiers are killed. The mood in our headquarters is bleak. One of my colonels, a two-tour veteran of Iraq, says of Maliki's intervention, 'We just lost this war.'

On another occasion, I brief the prime minister on a mission intended to seize a key Shi'a hitman. After much debate Maliki reluctantly agrees to allow the mission to proceed.

By the time I get back to my office, the mission has been scrubbed. 'What the hell for?' I demand. The answer is short and utterly dispiriting. The target of the planned raid has disappeared. He just got a phone call, tipping him off. The call came from someone in the prime minister's office. For a long time I just sit at my desk, looking at the maps and charts on my wall, seeing none of them. What the fuck are we doing here? I keep asking myself. I swallow more painkillers.

As the war grinds on I turn my attention to the province of Diyala—it's hard to imagine anywhere more violent than Baghdad, but Diyala, northeast of the capital, briefly takes the title. It has always been a troubled area and it was the power base of the Al Qaeda leader Zarqawi until his death. Now a string of very public murders brings it to the forefront of the Iraqi government's concern. The cynic in me suspects this is because the victims are Shi'a, but there's no denying the brutality.

First, a Shi'a family trying to flee the provincial capital, Baqubah, is intercepted by insurgents on the road out of town. They are beaten, then the children are shot, one at a time, while the parents are forced to watch. The last child to die is a girl aged five. Then the insurgents assault the woman, again forcing her husband to watch, before shooting her through the head. The man is the last to be killed. I try very hard not to think about what was going through the man's mind, and that of his wife, as their family were murdered before their eyes. I don't succeed.

On another day, insurgents attack one of the police stations in Diyala, capturing twenty-four officers. They are all ritually executed in one of the town squares. What was it like to be policeman number twenty-four? I also wonder how the Sunni executioner felt as he pulled the trigger on the last policeman, blowing out the brains of a fellow countryman. Maybe I have too active an imagination. Despite months of this shit, I've become more susceptible to barbarism, not less. I guess I just need to harden-the-fuck-up.

As October rolls into November the security crisis in Diyala becomes a daily concern, in addition to Baghdad's miseries. Along with my boss, Major General Fastabend, I spend hour after hour working up plans to deal with the violence. We wear a path to the offices of various Iraqi generals trying to find a way to get things under control. We talk ourselves blue in the face. I fly to Baqubah to meet with local Iraqi commanders and tribal chiefs. The meetings are long on talk and short on solutions.

Things go from bad to worse. An American-led security operation is mounted in Diyala that turns into a series of deadly battles, during which the insurgents fight with remarkable discipline in platoon-sized groups. Volleys of rocket-propelled grenades cripple even M1 Abrams tanks. Insurgents pretend to surrender, to lure American soldiers out from their armoured personnel carriers and Humvees. The soldiers walk into a hail of fire. The ground commander calls for air strikes, which last almost twelve hours. After forty hours of fierce fighting in the streets and nearby fields, the insurgents melt away. More medical evacuation helicopters shake my hut.

I divide my time between briefing and coaching Iraqi generals, advising and cajoling politicians whom I increasingly despise, arguing with US embassy staffers who want to quibble over semantics while Iraq slides towards the abyss, and struggling to master the pain in my right side. One day Cory drags me back to the hospital. A doctor tells me he thinks I've got

a chronic inflammation of the shoulder joint and a tendon separated from the bone at my elbow. He injects industrial quantities of cortisone into my shoulder in a procedure that brings tears to my eyes, then hands me a large box of painkillers.

A week later I am back asking for more. The doctor thinks I should be evacuated to the big US military hospital in Germany for a full-blown examination; I thank him and decline. I leave with more pills.

On 5 November 2006 everything stops with the announcement that Saddam Hussein has been found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to hang. Baghdad erupts with joy—at least the Shi'a districts. Anyone in Baghdad who owns an AK-47, which is basically everyone, lets rip with magazine after magazine of celebratory fire. The skies above the city are filled with bullets, which cause multiple casualties when they come back to earth. Many find their way into our compound. For several hours it becomes impossible to leave the protection of the stone-walled Republican Palace as bullets fall like hail.

I feel like joining in the joyous shooting. In an email home to Jane that night I write:

> I've just signed a set of orders for special security arrangements following the announcement that Saddam Hussein has been given the death penalty. As I signed the orders I couldn't help but think back to 1991 when we were sitting across the border from Iraq, waiting to start the ground war, and hearing Saddam on the radio ranting about how he would defeat us in the Mother of All Battles. I guess he lasted a bit longer than we thought back then, but who would have guessed that 15 years later I'd be sitting in Baghdad, in one of his palaces, signing documents to bolster security after a verdict convicting him of mass murder? What a strange tale.

A few days later my health takes a further dive. At first I think I have the flu, but when the symptoms of congested airways and aching limbs pass, the coughing continues, then gets worse. I struggle through each day and night, trying to keep on top of my work, determined to do my job.

Eventually my boss orders me back to the hospital. I am diagnosed with pneumonia; my lungs have lost 20 per cent of their capacity due to infection and inflammation. I am dosed with more pills and sent to my hut to rest, where I spend two days hacking up my lungs. Every cough jolts my shoulder, and I lie in bed with my left hand clasped against the injured joint, shuddering with pain and a fever, and racked by coughing fits that leave me weak and breathless. I have never felt so wretched.

When I drag myself back to my office on the third day, I can tell from the expressions on the faces of my staff that I don't look good. I'll rest when I get home to Australia, I think. I've only got a month to try to salvage something from this place, to do some good if I can.

In addition to my normal duties, I become involved in an extraordinarily diverse range of new tasks.

I routinely view American documents marked 'NOFORN', which means not to be viewed by non-US personnel; but I view them anyway—it would be impossible for me to do my job otherwise. One day General Casey orders me to attend an exclusive committee run by the American embassy, despite the fact that the issues being managed by this group are strictly for US eyes only. The spooks in the embassy have a fit. General Casey insists, and I join meetings held within a special room that is said to be totally immune to eavesdropping. I am made to sign several whole-of-life secrecy agreements. Some of the stuff I deal with in that committee makes my hair stand on end.

One day a guy in jeans knocks on the door of my office and introduces himself as someone from the CIA. He invites me to the agency headquarters

in Baghdad to be briefed on ‘a delicate matter’. Once there, he shepherds me past security barriers and into a large room where lots of people are hammering at keyboards, talking on the phone or reading files. One of them sees my unfamiliar uniform and calls out, ‘Stranger! Cover up!’ at which there is a flurry of folders being slapped closed and monitors being switched off. It’s almost comical.

‘Relax, everyone,’ says my escort. ‘He’s with me.’ Half an hour later I have signed another non-disclosure agreement and have more secrets stuffed into my head, this time on a highly sensitive program that the CIA is running that needs to be coordinated with some of the conventional operations we are running.

I spend days in the city of Basra in southern Iraq, and along with the general commanding the British forces in the province, I conduct agonisingly drawn-out negotiations with representatives of the various Basra power blocs to hammer out a plan that might contain the violence, restore basic public services and create jobs. The British commander, Major General Richard Shirreff, brings the nominated representative to Baghdad to assure Maliki that the plan has the support of the locals, and within minutes of starting the meeting the man from Basra does a total backflip and denounces the plan he signed up to the day before. I sit flabbergasted, looking at him across the table. Someone has got to him overnight. Maliki decides to appoint a security committee chaired by one of the most notorious sectarian troublemakers in Basra, answering to the crooked governor. I give up on Basra.

In mid-November we get hit by rockets six nights in a row. One American is killed and several others are wounded. No-one gets much sleep but that is nothing new. With the violence hitting new peaks, my days are a blur of sickening casualty reports, futile meetings and unachievable deadlines. My daily intake of painkillers would stun a horse. The

pneumonia drags into its third week. I have a cough like a two-pack-a-day man.

The Coalition night raids targeting insurgents double. My boss David Fastabend and I develop a system where one of us skips a night's sleep every second day in order to monitor the operations, run interference with the prime minister's office and pick up the pieces when things go wrong, which is anytime we kill civilians. Inevitably, and depressingly, this happens with some frequency. One night an AC-130 'Spectre' gunship, a flying arsenal equipped with multiple cannons up to 105 millimetres in calibre, accidently kills a group of women and children while supporting a Special Forces raid. I spend a lot of time on the receiving end of Maliki's outrage after that. For a change, I have no trouble seeing his point of view.

My emails home to Jane become more and more pithy. In the closing weeks of November they often read something like, 'It's 3 a.m. and I'm too tired to write a proper message. I just want you to know I love you.' Another message dated 21 November reads, 'I got into bed at 5 a.m. this morning. It's been a very tough day, with virtually no sleep for two days straight. The shoulder is pretty painful but the cough is a little better.'

Two days later the violence in Baghdad escalates from horrific to unfathomable.

Just after three in the afternoon on 23 November, the sound of an explosion penetrates my office; I can tell it's another car bomb, a big one. It sounds like it came from the northeast, in the direction of the Shi'a enclave of Sadr City. I don't even raise my head from the papers I am working on; someone will come to tell me what has happened soon enough. Then there is another detonation, just as loud. That's a bit unusual. A short time later there is a third huge detonation. Something ugly is going down. I head for the Operations Centre.

There are more explosions. In the space of forty-five minutes, six powerful car bombs are detonated across Sadr City, accompanied by mortar attacks. The casualty figures keep stacking up. I soon have numbers: 215 people have been killed and 257 others have been injured. The scale of the deaths and the sophistication of the attacks are shocking. It is a trademark Al Qaeda operation.

By now my team has become skilled at crisis management and the next few hours are a blur of activity in the Operations Centre. The inevitable revenge killings will start at any moment. Mortars are already reported to be falling on some Sunni neighbourhoods. I recommend an immediate lockdown of the city, and before nightfall the prime minister announces an indefinite day-and-night curfew, which eventually lasts for four days. Despite this, the militias run riot. More mortars are fired. Gunfire echoes around the city. Several mosques are attacked and torched. Reports arrive of a group of Sunnis being seized, doused in fuel and burned alive within sight of a checkpoint manned by Iraqi police, who take no action. Almost ninety Sunnis are killed within twenty-four hours of the blasts. By the end of the month almost 2000 Iraqis are dead.

Around this time I learn I’m to be promoted to the rank of major general and appointed Deputy Chief of the Australian Army. The promotion will occur here in Baghdad in early December, a week before I am due to go home. I also receive a note from a friend who works at the Army History Unit. He tells me I am the first Australian since 1944 to be promoted to the rank of general whilst in combat. The previous fellow was a brigadier named Ramsay, fighting the Japanese in New Guinea.

The proposition of advancement and a career and a life back in Australia seems unreal. What is real is the ceaseless violence. Reality is the gunfire and detonations that rattle the windows. Reality is loading and cocking my weapon before heading out into the Red Zone, or being woken

by the din of a Black Hawk helicopter laden with wounded men making a fast approach to the landing pad of the hospital. Reality is the weeping of a father who has just been told his son is almost certainly dead. For months I have thought about going home, in a fuzzy kind of way, but the idea of leaving suddenly seems wrong, as though I am abandoning a job that isn't finished. I have thought on many occasions how this dreadful place has damaged my soul. It seems as though I'll be leaving a part of my wounded soul here.

A week later I am standing at the front of a crowded Operations Centre while General Casey presides over my promotion ceremony. A video, recorded in Australia a few days earlier, is playing on the big screens, where the Chief of the Australian Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, makes a gratifying and funny speech congratulating me on my advancement. The camera pans and there is my Jane, adding her own congratulations and heartfelt words. I feel my throat tighten with emotion. She is listening to the ceremony in real time via a phone hook-up. General Casey steps forward and pins a medal on my uniform, the US Legion of Merit, then asks my boss and friend, David Fastabend, to help attach my new major general badges of rank.

That night I sit at my computer and type a message to Jane: 'Hi my darling, this will be my last email from Iraq. It hardly seems possible that I am finally typing these words after what seems like such a long time here. I am longing to come home to you. I know it's been hard for you, but the waiting and worrying is almost over.' I add a few details about travel arrangements and then close with, 'Thank you for your love and support during this difficult job, sweetheart. It has always been the best part of my day when I open your emails, or talk to you on the phone, especially when you say you love me. We'll be able to say that to each other in person very soon! I love you, your John.'

‹ ›

The day of my departure has arrived. I have been in Iraq for 265 days. I am still in the office, trying to finalise a dozen loose ends for my successor, when Cory says, ‘Sir, just stop! If we don’t leave right now you’ll screw up your flight home.’

I’ve already said all my goodbyes, except to my personal staff. I dash to my hut, throw my bags in the back of our armoured car and start my final run down Route Irish towards the airport. I feel a swirl of emotions: relief at having survived, regret for so many lost lives, gratitude for friendships, dismay at the weak and biased Iraqi leadership, and excitement to be going home. But my strongest feeling is one of failure. In each of my previous military appointments, I have felt that I left the job better than I found it. In Iraq, though, all my efforts, all the long hours, all the talking and worrying and planning and wanting things to be better, have been for nothing. The country is going down the toilet.

The familiar sights along Route Irish slide past. Military trucks compete with dented and dirty civilian cars. The wide central space between the two lanes holds the same sad collection of trash and swampy bogs. The T-walls along each side are an unrelenting grey barrier beyond which brown, flat-roofed houses and tenement blocks rise. It has all become so ordinary.

Suddenly a car comes charging at us from one of the side roads. It has a single male occupant and looks a little heavy in the rear, the telltale signs of a car bomb. Specialist Coil, my driver, sees the threat and throws the car sideways. The gunner in the Humvee ahead of us snaps up his weapon and aims straight through the windscreen at the civilian driver. My guts clench and I stop breathing, waiting for the explosion. Christ, here it comes, after all this.

Then, nothing happens. The idiotic Iraqi driver realises he is seconds from being shot, slams on the brakes and disappears behind us. It was just bad driving, typical of what I've seen every day on Iraq's roads, where there is no licensing system.

'Jeez,' says Cory. 'I thought for a second there we were going to finish on a sour note.'

I feel ill. My nerves are screwed up tight and I notice my hands are shaking. 'You okay, sir?' asks Cory.

I control my breathing and answer, 'Just get me the fuck out of this place.'

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JANE’S STORY, PART 2

When John told me he’d been invited on a tour of Iraq with the Chief of the Army in 2004, I was very concerned. We’d moved to Darwin and he loved his new job commanding a brigade. After years of struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, he was happier than I’d seen him in a long time. The idea that he’d return to the place where all his troubles began was worrying, but he was keen to see how the soldiers from his brigade were faring.

When he got back, he told me he’d met with a group of young Diggers whom he’d farewelled from Darwin just a few months before. They’d been involved in gun battles with insurgents, and John said that he could see how this had aged them. That’s what war does, I thought, it robs people of their youth. It makes young men old. I hoped these young soldiers wouldn’t suffer as John had.

The following year he took another short trip to Iraq and then became determined to get a posting there. My heart sank. What terrible memories would he add to the ones he already had? He argued he might be able to put some of his demons to rest. He thought that helping the Iraqis, instead of fighting them, might somehow make up for all the deaths he’d been a part of in 1991. He is a soldier, and I understood that this was what he was trained to do. I just hoped he wouldn’t go.

We moved from Darwin to Canberra in January 2006 so John could take up a new job. Just days after he started he called me from his office to

say he would be leaving for Iraq in a month. He was so pleased.

I was scared. I hid my fears and helped him pack. This time, he'd be gone for almost a year. We've always been very devoted to each other, and apart from anything else, I knew I'd miss him dreadfully.

His departure was as difficult as when I'd seen him off from Germany in 1990. At least this time I had my brothers to support me as he disappeared through the security barriers at the airport. That night I placed a smiling photograph of John next to our bed. I said 'Goodnight' to that photo every night while he was away.

My life now was very different from the last time John went off to war. The two cheeky young boys I'd looked after back then were now grown men. Our oldest son David was a soldier too, and he and Emily had married the year before. Our other son Daniel had a new job and loved Darwin's casual lifestyle so much that he decided to stay when we moved south. Our boys were making their own way in the world and we were proud of them, but it meant that I was on my own while John was away.

What was also different from 1991 was how easy it was to communicate. John would call regularly and email almost every day. I knew that on many nights he was so tired he could barely type more than a few lines, but he always wrote something, even if it was just, 'I love you.' I loved him for that.

He'd reveal little of the horrors he was witnessing, but I had a sense of how bad things were from the news. I fretted about John and how it would affect him. I knew he was making trips into dangerous areas of Baghdad and other parts of Iraq, but he played down the risks. He kept assuring me he had highly trained soldiers whose job it was to keep him safe. But I worried the whole time he was there.

I'd often travel to visit my mother in Deniliquin, in southern New South Wales. Mum had no internet and so to keep in touch John would have

to telephone. It was strange to be sitting in the little house where I grew up, talking to my husband in a war zone on the other side of the world.

One day when I was visiting Mum my phone rang at an hour that must have been after midnight in Iraq. I was surprised to hear John, and when he paused for a moment, I knew something was wrong. Then he said, ‘We’re getting hit with rockets, and I just wanted to tell you I love you.’

Suddenly there was the sound of an explosion in the background and I heard him swear. My legs went weak and I started crying. I knew he was frightened. I could hear a siren in the background and more explosions. John told me again that he loved me and our boys. Then he said he had to go. I waited by the phone anxiously until he called back to say he was safe. That night it was me who had the nightmares.

One night at home in Canberra I woke with a terrible feeling of dread. I just knew that something had happened to him. It was a little after midnight; late afternoon in Baghdad. I reached out for the photo of John and for a long time I just lay there, staring at it. Hours later, exhausted with worry, I slipped it under my pillow and fell asleep.

I was never so pleased to hear John’s voice when he phoned the next day. He said he’d had ‘a bit of a scare’ but was okay. When I pressed him for details, he revealed he’d been at the Iraqi prime minister’s office when it was attacked by rockets. He played down the incident and said he had a bruised shoulder. It wasn’t until he came home that he told me how serious it had been and that two Iraqis had been killed.

Special days came and went with John not there to celebrate: David and Emily’s first wedding anniversary, our thirtieth year of marriage, our fiftieth birthdays and Daniel’s twenty-first. My birthday was celebrated back home in Deniliquin with my family and many of my old schoolmates. What a different life I had led to them, moving all over the country and around the

world. My friends were supportive but it was hard for them to comprehend what I was going through.

Someone who understood only too well was Brigadier Steve Day, the man John had replaced in Iraq. He called every month on the same date, which was the day of the month that John took over. He chose this date because he said it was the best day he had had in Iraq. He would ask how I was going and if there was anything I needed. I will always be grateful for his kindness.

As John's deployment dragged on, the news from Iraq only got worse. I knew this was affecting him. He spoke of the endless reports of dead soldiers. He told me about the despair he felt for their families. I loved him for his concern and compassion, but I knew all this added to his sadness. He wrote of his frustrations with Iraqi officials. He spoke fondly of his staff. He would try to write of lighter events; that it was someone's birthday or how his team had a laugh at some amusing incident. But I knew there wasn't much to laugh about in Baghdad.

Then, finally, John came home.

I waited alone at the airport, which is how I wanted it. I stood near the doorway leading into the public area, keyed-up and even a bit nervous. The passengers started straggling through, then finally I saw him, still dressed in his desert camouflage uniform. His face lit up; he came to me and dropped his bag and he held me very tightly. We both wept a little as people streamed past. I didn't care.

I was shocked by his appearance. He looked tired and drawn. He had a lingering cough from his lung infection. He was in pain from his shoulder injury. When I got him home he slept for days. And then we went to the beach for a holiday. He'd learnt one lesson from his first experience of war: we'd go for long walks along the beach and he'd tell me what had happened, what he'd seen. It seemed to help, but there was still so much

sadness to deal with. And guilt—he felt responsible for the deaths of some young American soldiers who'd been killed by a roadside bomb. I told him over and over that he'd had to make a choice, that it wasn't his fault. He'd just stare out at the waves and say, 'Yes, it was my fault.'

Soon after, he had surgery to remove pieces of bone that had been crushed into his shoulder joint. His recovery was painful, but he worked hard to get fit again. His shoulder has never fully recovered.

And just as I'd feared, the nightmares returned. They even came during our holiday. He was home, but not really home. He couldn't watch any of the media coverage of Iraq. When the news came on, he'd change the channel or leave the room.

Eventually John went to see another psychiatrist, who started him on new medication. I'd wait outside the office during their appointments and then try to talk to John a little on the way home. He was so tired after those sessions, like he'd been through a real struggle. All I could do was reassure him that it would get better, and that I would always be there to support him. He'd look at me and say, 'That's the most important thing in the world to me.' But somehow he still looked sad. There would always be nightmares after those sessions, and I'd hear John groaning in his sleep before he'd suddenly wake with a shout, his arms up to shield himself from something.

The next day he'd get dressed in his uniform, put on a smile, and go to work.

MIDDLE EAST AREA OF OPERATIONS, 2010–11

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MIDDLE EAST COMMANDER

Even from 27,000 feet the mountains are imposing, colossal. To the left and to the right, and as far as I can see ahead, the vastness of the Hindu Kush looms as a seemingly impregnable land barrier. Somewhere below is the Khyber Pass, where the armies of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan trod on their campaigns to India. It's where the troops of the mighty British Empire advanced, and then retreated, throughout the Great Game, the contest with Russia for strategic supremacy in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. The Mujahideen used these mountain passes to ferry weapons to fight the Russians. Their sons and grandsons in the Taliban tread the same paths today. It's said that every stone on the Khyber has been soaked in blood.

It's early January 2010, and I'm in an RAAF C-130 Hercules transport plane en route from Pakistan to Kabul—another general come to quell the Afghans.

Standing behind the pilot, I gaze down at the sharp peaks of the mountains, their tops and high valleys dusted with snow. Their flanks are a mass of creased ridges running to lower ground. Below the snow line, the mountains are an unrelenting dirty brown without a trace of vegetation. I can't see any signs of villages or roads. It is desolate and alien.

There's nothing to mark the border, but the map on the instrument panel says we've just crossed into Afghanistan—the signal for passengers and crew to squeeze into their body armour. Wider valleys appear, then

patches of desert, until we are flying over vast empty areas interrupted by isolated ranges that rear up like breaching whales. Finally I see evidence of humans: a few rectangular mud-walled compounds connected by dirt tracks. In the depths of winter, these people spend weeks huddled inside, surviving the cold by burning donkey manure that women have collected and dried throughout the year. What a place to eke out an existence. The Afghans have been fashioned by the harshness of this environment.

We commence our descent. Helmet on, I stand behind the pilot, peering over his shoulder. Beside me, the officer I will soon replace as Australian National Commander in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Major General Mark Kelly, points to a city nestled on a valley floor surrounded by huge mountains.

‘Kabul!’ he shouts to me over the roar of the engines. A blue, smoky haze floats above it. The streets are arranged in surprisingly neat and uniform rectangles. The visibility drops as we descend through the haze and over the city—a vast sprawl of one- and two-storey buildings, some painted, most earthen.

As we make a final turn to line up with the runway, the co-pilot signals for Mark and me to strap ourselves in for the landing. The tarmac fills the windshield. It appears we’ll spear right into it, but at the last moment the pilot pulls back and the bloated aircraft levels off to land. There is a screech and a solid bump and the propellers are thrown into reverse thrust, engines roaring, every panel rattling. Our speed drops quickly and after a very short roll we pull off the runway to where dozens more military aircraft are parked.

I thank the pilots with a handshake and squeeze past stacked pallets of stores and down the ramp of the Hercules into bitingly cold air. A welcoming committee awaits. The deputy commander of the Australian forces in Afghanistan, Brigadier Wayne Budd, greets Mark Kelly, who is

still in command, then grasps my hand. ‘Welcome to Afghanistan, sir!’ he shouts over the engines.

The next two days are a blur of meetings and briefings. As the incoming Australian commander, I must get to know the key Coalition and Afghan leaders in the capital, along with our ambassador and his staff, other Australian government agencies, and representatives of the Red Cross and other non-government organisations. I am driven around the city from one heavily guarded compound to the next. I come across old friends from my 2006 deployment in Iraq. One of my younger brothers, Damian, a brigadier in the Australian Army who is close to the end of a ten-month deployment, is also here—this is his second tour in Afghanistan. Earlier in this deployment, Damian managed security for the elections and now he is working for the commander of the International Security Assistance Force —ISAF—American four-star General Stan McChrystal.

I had got to know McChrystal in Iraq, where he commanded the Coalition Special Forces. We have a friendly reunion in his office and briefly reminisce about 2006 before discussing the campaign in Afghanistan. He expresses guarded confidence about the future, although he sometimes worries about the ability and will of Afghan politicians, especially President Hamid Karzai. It sounds a bit like Baghdad in 2006, but I want to remain open-minded until I can form my own opinions. As I’m leaving, General McChrystal grabs my hand, warmly. ‘It’s great to see you, John,’ he says. ‘It seems you and I have just moved on to the next war. I’m looking forward to working with you again.’ My task and the job of our soldiers in Afghanistan will be extremely difficult; we’ll need all the help we can get. Having a good relationship with the Coalition commander is a good start.

My introduction to the commander of the Afghan National Army (ANA), Lieutenant General Karimi, is also encouraging. Karimi is an

extroverted charmer. He welcomes me warmly, praises my brother Damian, proclaims his admiration for Australian soldiers, and delivers a surprisingly frank and self-critical analysis of the progress of his troops. Karimi admits there is a long way to go but also expresses confidence that the expansion of his army is on track and that the Coalition training program will deliver. Between amusing asides, he imparts a strong impression of being a realist who understands the vulnerability of the campaign and the steps needed to achieve success. I leave his headquarters confident they've put the right man in charge.

As we crisscross the city, the misery of life for the locals is revealed through the windows of my armoured car. Often the sides of the potholed roads are jammed with tiny, ramshackle stores. The shopkeepers are dressed in the traditional *shalwar kameez*, a long shirt over baggy trousers and a dark vest. On their heads they wear a *taqiyah*, a brimless embroidered cap, or a *pakol*, a rolled woollen hat. Beyond the bitumen there is little paving, and everything that isn't coated in dust is covered in mud. The items for sale are from the latest shipment of cheap and nasty Chinese-made goods, every second shop selling the same gaudy plastic flowers, toys or buckets. Food sellers display sagging vegetables, piled nuts or crudely butchered meat in open stalls, oblivious to the dust and flies coating the produce. I am told Afghan bread is a real treat and I consider stopping our convoy to make a purchase, until I see a baker using a cup to scoop muddy water from the drain to mix his dough. On every corner thin young boys stand beside rickety trolleys selling lottery tickets, cigarettes and mobile phone cards. The vendors look desperate, dark eyes darting to every potential customer, hands plucking at the clothes of pedestrians, pleading for a sale. Some simply squat motionless in the mud beside their merchandise, bothering no-one and selling nothing. I wonder how they survive.

For the first time, I see women clad in the all-covering blue *burqa* that was so emblematic of Taliban rule. The garments have a small, oval-shaped gauze screen to allow the woman to see out, but otherwise they are amorphous tents. Occasionally, modern high-heeled boots twinkle at the hem, a glimpse of the real person inside, but most wear dirty cheap shoes. Here in Kabul, which sees itself as modern and progressive, a few bold women wear western street clothes, with their heads covered by scarves, but they are rare.

And on almost every street I see women beggars—many of them war widows—in filthy *burqas*, grubby children around them, their hands out for a few coins. They squat in the dirt like wilted flowers.

With my rounds of Kabul complete, we fly southwest to Tarin Kot in Uruzgan province, where Australia's combat troops are based. Back in 2001 the town was a significant Taliban stronghold, one of the last to fall. Late in that year, a then obscure Hamid Karzai happened to be in the district trying to raise a militia force with the help of US Special Forces. When the townspeople rebelled and threw out the Taliban governor, Karzai and his militia defended the town against a Taliban counter-attack, supported by US advisers and airpower. This small military victory became the basis of Karzai's reputation as a fighting leader; it gained him prestige with the Americans and with the rebels fighting the Taliban regime, eventually leading to his current post as President of Afghanistan. Urbane and foreign educated, Karzai became America's main man, for better or worse.

Today Tarin Kot is a town of around 10,000—the capital of a province with 300,000 people—centred on a bazaar with a hundred shops. It comprises a higgledy-piggledy mix of cement-block and mud-brick buildings, none higher than two storeys. The town, like the province, is an isolated backwater even by Afghan standards, with a single road running south to Kandahar to meet up with the so-called highway that circles the

country. It’s one of the poorest provinces in one of the world’s most impoverished countries.

The surrounding mountain peaks rise to 2,000 metres. The valleys between are vast and desolate, apart from a narrow strip of green either side of the rivers, where, in summer, crops, orchards and opium poppies flourish. It is here that most of the Australian soldiers patrol. It’s where they fight and where some have died. The Diggers call it the green zone.

As we come into land at Tarin Kot, I get an aerial ‘big picture’ view of the battlefield area. It’s coming to the end of winter. The fertile strip is fallow, and the trees in the orchards are sticks waiting for spring. The main forward operating base containing Australian, Dutch and American personnel looms into view a couple of kilometres from Tarin Kot. Overlooking the town from a barren, undulating perch, the base is a cluster of semi-permanent buildings around a single dirt airstrip.

Off to the north lies a large vegetated plain called Dorafshan, which narrows into the opening of the dramatic Baluchi Pass and the dangerous Baluchi Valley beyond. Lost in the haze further north and hidden by mountains lies the Chora Valley, the scene of recent intense fighting. Running away to the east is the Mirabad Valley, another hostile area, and with an east–west road that makes it vital to the security of the province. Away to the west a narrow pass pierces jagged mountains, leading to flat fertile lands along yet another river valley. I know from my reading that this area is off limits to our troops; it is Taliban country. The whole province is about 180 kilometres across and 90 kilometres north–south. But it’s all about the valleys; the desert that makes up most of the province, called the *dasht*, is empty apart from camels and goats and their nomadic herders.

The pilot of our Hercules executes a fast, low, curving approach before banging the aircraft onto the bumpy strip and slamming the propellers into reverse. With the dust from our landing still hanging in the air, I am greeted

by the commanding officer of the Australian Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force 2—MRTF2—Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Hocking. He escorts me to a low hill at one end of the airstrip, where he points out the salient features: the American and Dutch helicopter units on one side of the field, including Apache attack helicopters; the weapons ranges behind us, from where the sound of firing can be heard; the freight area, piled with stores; the large ammunition storage area; the off-limits Australian Special Forces compound; the two-storey hardened steel accommodation blocks, designed to protect our soldiers from rocket and mortar fire; and the ridge of nearby mountains, from where rockets are usually fired into the base. On the hill beside us are the launching rails and hangar for the Scan Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles—small but vital surveillance drones—that provide real-time imagery for Australian commanders.

The majority of Lieutenant Colonel Hocking's soldiers are dispersed among several patrol bases in the valleys radiating out from Tarin Kot. So far, his task force has had a successful tour, although they're still grieving for Private Ben Ranaudo, who died last July when an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded. Another soldier suffered horrific wounds in the same incident. The task force only has a month left in Afghanistan. No-one says so, but I sense that keeping the rest of the 600 soldiers alive until they leave is a high priority.

Our short drive through the base towards the Coalition headquarters reveals the character of the place: it is roughly utilitarian, built to support combat operations. The dusty internal roads take us past stacked pallets of equipment and spare parts, dented and tired-looking vehicles, communications towers and satellite dishes, razor-wire fences with litter trapped in their barbs, knocked-together plywood buildings, and wall upon wall of 'Hesco' barriers made from steel mesh cages filled with rock and earth, designed to limit the blast of explosions.

Leaving our vehicles, we plod over the layer of stones spread between the buildings, laid to counter the winter mud, but which make even the shortest walk tiresome. Inside the prefabricated headquarters building, I meet the key staff, receive a detailed briefing on the tactical situation, hear summaries of progress in training the Afghans, and listen to useful descriptions of local attitudes, tribal dynamics, political manoeuvrings, insurgent and criminal activity, police incompetency, crop cycles and a dozen other issues affecting every aspect of life in Uruzgan. There are multiple layers to everything, even before considering military operations to combat the insurgency. It will take time to understand this complex environment.

The Coalition here is under the command of the Dutch-led Task Force Uruzgan, which provides much of the hardware Australia didn't bring to the party, such as helicopter and artillery support. I meet the commander of the Dutch forces with whom we share the base. He is in the process of preparing to hand over to a new commander, Brigadier General Kees Van Den Heuvel, a remarkably tall and genial officer whom I will become friends with in the months ahead. The success of our mission in Uruzgan and the safety of our soldiers rest heavily on maintaining a positive relationship with my Dutch counterparts. I leave this meeting with a sense of cautious optimism, despite the obvious challenges.

The final meeting on my whirlwind introductory tour is with the commanding officer of the Australian Special Forces task group. Their compound sits within the base but is an island of secrecy behind locked gates. From within, the group conducts sophisticated operations attacking insurgent networks and other classified missions. The officer in charge of the current rotation of Special Forces soldiers provides the first of many briefings I will receive in this compound. As the national commander I have a say in the approval process of many of their operations, particularly when

sensitive missions are undertaken. It is a rare opportunity for someone like me, with a conventional forces background, to be admitted to the shadowy and lethal world of Special Forces. Over the year ahead I will get to know many of the men well and will form an unshakable admiration for their skill and courage.

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After a night spent on double bunks, jammed into one of the few spare ‘rooms’ in the base’s steel-box accommodation, our party is once again at the side of the airstrip, shivering in the sub-zero dawn.

As we wait for our ride—a civilian turboprop commuter aircraft on lease to the Dutch—I watch the sunlight creep down the distant mountains, spread across the rolling *dasht* around us and eventually light the groves of bare trees in the river valley running through Tarin Kot. There is an ageless beauty to the scene. I reflect that the mountains now bathed in golden light have watched the puny struggles of invaders like us many times, and seen little real change. Yet I feel the job here is worth doing, that the soldiers mounting early-morning patrols though the chilly shadows of the valleys are putting their lives at risk for a purpose—to deny the Dark Age philosophy of the Taliban, to help a long-suffering people and to prevent the country from once again becoming a haven for violent extremists.

The buzz of an approaching aircraft interrupts my reverie, and I farewell Andrew Hocking and the others who have come to see Mark Kelly off for the last time; I will be back in a couple of weeks for a longer stay and to get around to the isolated patrol bases.

Forty minutes later we land in Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan, located in the province of the same name, south of Uruzgan. It has a population of half a million. It was once the Taliban capital and is now

the site of a huge concentration of Coalition headquarters, supply installations, communications and intelligence facilities, and a massive airfield for combat aircraft and transport planes—it is said to be the busiest single-runway airstrip in the world.

As in Kabul, dozens of Australian officers are assigned to various positions in Coalition headquarters. They have diverse roles including planning, operations, logistics, training and intelligence. They are known as ‘embedded’ officers and give us a link into various vital areas of the vast Coalition war machine. We also have our own logistic and personnel support organisation here, and I want to meet as many of our people as possible, as well as making calls on senior Coalition commanders.

The many meetings go well. The most important is my encounter with the British two-star general in command of the whole southern region of Afghanistan, Major General Nick Carter. Uruzgan province falls within his command and I must establish a good working relationship with him, to ensure that we get the right level of support and that our mission is properly understood and aligned with the wider effort in the troubled south of the country.

Carter is focused, confident and slightly aloof, delivering his views in clipped tones that discourage argument. He has an impressive pedigree, with earlier combat deployments in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. The fact that I fought with the British in the 1990s helps to break the ice. We get off to a good start, although I sense we will not be friends. His attention is firmly—and understandably—on combat operations in Helmand province, to the west of Kandahar, where thousands of British troops are fighting alongside US marines in the most bloody and brutal combat area in Afghanistan.

In the months ahead I will be a frequent visitor to Carter’s office in a bid to ensure vital resources are not bled away from our own area of

responsibility. At times, it will be a difficult and frustrating task, but that is in the future. Today, we part with smiles and promises of regular and cooperative contact.

A day later I am again on the flight deck of an Australian Hercules, bound for the United Arab Emirates, where my new headquarters is located. In a few more days I will formally take command of the Australian Joint Task Force with responsibility for all our forces in Afghanistan and the Middle East, called JTF 633. The task force includes the combat elements, support organisations and embedded staff officers that I have just visited in Afghanistan, the task force headquarters and several support units in the UAE, a fleet of Hercules transport aircraft and Orion AP-3C patrol aircraft, a Royal Australian Navy frigate on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy patrol in the nearby waters, and a group of around a hundred soldiers and their armoured vehicles in Baghdad, where they protect the embassy and provide secure transport for our ambassador. My new command covers an area the size of Australia and includes countries where we do not have troops deployed but where we have a security interest, including Pakistan. I will base myself in the UAE but spend a great deal of time in Afghanistan, where I will have a second headquarters in Kabul, led by my assistant commander. I'll be travelling extensively around the region to keep tabs on our various units and engage with counterparts in nearby countries. It's going to be a busy year.

On the day of the change-of-command ceremony, several hundred Australian Defence Force personnel gather in front of one of the hangars at the Emirati airbase where we have our compound and share part of the airfield. The Australian ambassador and some of his staff have come along, as have several senior officers of the UAE defence force.

Following a speech by Mark Kelly, the commander's blue-and-red pennant, which is flown at the headquarters to signify the commander's

authority, is lowered from the flagpole, folded and handed to him as a memento. A new pennant, mine, is then raised to the masthead. A document proclaiming the status of command of the joint task force is produced, which Mark signs as the outgoing commander and to which I add my own signature; in doing so I have formally accepted responsibility for several thousand Australian service men and women and the duties of national commander.

I make a short speech, in which I say, ‘There are few roles that provide greater challenges and rewards than to lead one’s countrymen and women during combat operations. This command will be the pinnacle of my thirty-six years of service and I embrace it with excitement, pride and a great sense of responsibility.’

As I walk from the ceremony to my new headquarters, now officially the Commander of Joint Task Force 633, I feel the weight of that responsibility pressing on me. I resolve to do everything in my power to keep our people alive and send them home safely to their families.

I don’t know it yet, but I will fail.

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OUTSIDE THE WIRE

The first few weeks of my new command are consumed by endless briefings, hours of reading, and simply spending time walking around, meeting people, asking questions and sticking my nose into the business of my organisation. The Joint Task Force (JTF) 633 headquarters in the UAE —beside an airbase in the desert, 25 kilometres outside Dubai—is still being built. We live and work in the middle of a major construction site where dozens of buildings, large and small, are being erected, plumbed, wired and fitted out. This new facility will be Australia's command and logistic hub for the entire Middle East for years to come, and a lot of money is being poured into it.

We need a morgue, but despite my insistence I find it has been dropped from the plans. In a harbinger to my frustrations in the year ahead, I am told by officers back in Australia that they know better than me. They contend we can save money by storing our dead soldiers with the Canadians, who have a base next to ours. It seems to be petty penny-pinching and disrespectful to treat our fallen soldiers this way. I nonetheless direct that we ask the Canadians. The reply is blunt: we are told to piss off and look after our own dead. Grudgingly, the planning officers on the other side of the world reinstate a mortuary. By the year's end it will be used many times.

Early in my posting I host a visit by my boss, Lieutenant General Mark Evans, the Chief of Joint Operations. From his headquarters near Canberra he has overall command of all Australia's forces deployed offshore. We are

old friends, but he has always been my superior. We first met when I was a trainee at the Officer Cadet School where he was an instructor. He is unfailingly polite and engaging but with a determined streak. His current appointment is immensely challenging, requiring him to juggle operational matters in which politics often plays a role. Over the course of 2010 our friendship will be tested by the demands of our distinct roles, and the friction that inevitably creeps in when two strong-willed commanders try to manage shared problems, separated by 12,000 kilometres.

We travel together from the UAE to Afghanistan and I ask the commander of the special operations group to take General Evans and me out to meet up with one of his patrols. It is unusual to take such a senior visitor ‘outside the wire’ beyond the relative security of the patrol bases, but it’s deemed safe enough for us to accompany a group of commandos who’ve arranged to meet with the leaders of a rural community in the east of Uruzgan.

We fly out in a US Army Black Hawk helicopter, doors open to the rushing slipstream. The chopper slices through jagged mountain passes, above wild rivers and low over neat villages and mud-walled compounds. We land in a field near an ancient abandoned fort that once guarded this wide valley. The steep mountains around us are blue with shadow and frosted with gleaming snow. It is ruggedly beautiful.

There’s little risk of IEDs in the open area where the helicopter drops us and we tramp a kilometre to the meeting. The gathering is impressive. There are probably a hundred men, dressed in traditional garb with elaborate cloth turbans wound around their heads. The men are sitting in a two-deep circle. The senior men—the *maliks*—form the inner circle. The Special Forces guys have brought an old parachute canopy, which they spread to form a large circular mat. The commandos sit in the centre with an interpreter.

We sit in the outer circle to listen. The patrol commander is asking the elders about the Taliban in their valley. How do they treat the people? Do they come often? Do they demand food? What do they tell the people about us, the Australians?

The answers, translated by an interpreter murmuring beside us, come in long soliloquies accompanied by gestures towards various parts of the valley. ‘Of course there are Taliban in the area,’ says one greybeard. ‘They are everywhere.’ He explains that when they come to a village they must be welcomed, as required by the ancient custom known as *Pashtunwali*. ‘Naturally they are also offered food, as any guest would be, even you,’ he says to the patrol commander.

There is a small ripple of laughter. ‘He has made a joke,’ whispers our interpreter. ‘That is a good sign.’

The conversation continues, the elders’ answers wrapped in polite phrases and guarded attitudes. The meeting discloses little but the exchange is important. The patrol commander explains why his men are here, telling the Afghans they respect the people of Uruzgan and want them to have a better life. ‘We want you to be able to transport your produce to the market in Tarin Kot without fear of the bombs the Taliban plant in the road,’ says the Australian. ‘Their bombs kill your family and innocent people from your villages.’ A few heads nod. A side discussion breaks out among some of the Afghans in a slightly heated tone. The Australian has hit a nerve.

This type of meeting—a *shura*—is vital to our mission. *Shuras* are conducted all the time, not just by Special Forces troops but also by the mentoring force. The purpose is to connect with the locals, hear their concerns and explain there is an alternative to the Taliban.

Off to the side, a combat medic is conducting an open-air clinic. Several men have come to be examined, offering vague descriptions of aches and pains. One or two are genuinely unwell. Tuberculosis is rife

among Afghans, along with typhoid and hepatitis A, due to poor sanitation. There have been cases of leprosy. There is little the medic can do, except to suggest a visit to the hospital in Tarin Kot. He dispenses a few painkillers, knowing that these will probably be sold.

I am surprised to see the unit's chaplain. He is holding a separate *shura* with religious leaders—imams—from surrounding villages. The chaplain tells me later the imams were respectful of another man of God, even though they thought he was misguided. The group found common ground in mutually revered figures such as Abraham, Moses and Christ. Beyond that, there was less agreement, but they parted with smiles and blessings. I praise the chaplain for his initiative in making overtures to such influential community members.

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In mid-February MRTF2 is relieved by a new force, Mentoring Task Force 1—MTF1. The new team is a slightly larger organisation, with a modified mission. Their focus will be training soldiers of the Afghan National Army; there will be no more reconstruction tasks. MTF1 comprises around 700 soldiers and is based on an infantry battalion, the 6th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, barracked in Brisbane. I will work hard to get to know the men and women in every corner of my dispersed command, but it is this group, which patrols the valleys and trains Afghan soldiers, that I will come to know best.

A month after the soldiers from MTF1 arrive, I stand with their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Blain, inside the gates of the base at Tarin Kot. Up in the valleys we have five patrol bases—and plans to build another two—where groups of between a dozen and thirty Diggers live and work for the eight months of their deployment. Around us are the

vehicles that will form the convoy to take us to Patrol Base Qudus in the Baluchi Valley, a dangerous area north of Tarin Kot. Our convoy consists mostly of Australian-made Bushmasters, wheeled armoured vehicles. Boxy, thick-walled and tough, the ‘Bushies’ are proven lifesavers, having withstood dozens of strikes by roadside bombs. A couple of trucks carrying ammunition and supplies also accompany us, along with an escort of three ASLAV (Australian Light Armoured Vehicles) reconnaissance vehicles, each equipped with a 25-millimetre cannon and two machine guns.

We received our orders in a dusty corner of the compound last night, a formal briefing for all of the officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of the vehicles in the convoy. Despite the fact that a general and a lieutenant colonel are among those travelling to Patrol Base Qudus, the man in tactical command is a junior officer, the young Armoured Corps lieutenant in charge of the ASLAVs. He seems completely unfazed by the seniority of his wards, a trait I find admirable in Australian soldiers. ‘Sir,’ he told me at the end of the orders, ‘if we get in the shit, try not to get killed. It would look bad on my record.’

It’s time to go. I clamber into the rear of a Bushmaster, taking the forward right seat so I can see out the bulletproof glass of the compartment where the driver and vehicle commander sit. We are all carrying Steyr assault rifles and wear body armour with ammunition pouches and helmets, ballistic eyewear and fire-resistant gloves. Straps are pulled tight: if we hit an IED, the force of the detonation will be transmitted through the hull as a violent shock wave, throwing around anything or anyone inside that is not tied down. Even wedged in as we are, there’s a chance that our ankles will be shattered as the metal plate under our boots is shoved upwards by the force of a blast. There’ve been times when the soldiers who stand in the rear hatches, manning weapons, have been blown completely clear of the Bushmaster, many metres in to the air, by the force of an explosion.

They've usually had their ankles or legs broken, even before they hit the ground. One soldier I spoke to after such an explosion told me he had a terrific bird's-eye view of everything happening below, before he came crashing back to earth.

We pass through a gap in the Hesco perimeter and head north, bumping over the potholed road through Tarin Kot. The town is a dilapidated version of the worst areas of Kabul, but even more impoverished. Mud-brick buildings with rickety verandahs made from saplings sit between canvas-roofed wooden stalls selling produce. Knots of dark-turbaned men congregate along the street, watching our passage. Others squat between the stalls with timeless patience, lifting their shawls to protect their faces from the vehicle dust. Apart from a scattering of cheap Chinese motorcycles and tangled wires between the larger buildings, the scene could be from the time of Christ, or Mohammed.

This isn't the first time I've been to one of our patrol bases, but my earlier visits were in a helicopter, a rare treat as there are never enough choppers to go around. The flight on my first visit to Patrol Base Qudus took ten minutes. Today's journey will take several hours. We drive the 30 kilometres along ungraded rocky roads through fields, villages and desert. We call into another Australian outpost along the way, a small patrol base called Buman, on the eastern edge of the Dorafshan district. This relatively fertile agricultural area has been the scene of sharp battles and ongoing unrest, and where the Dutch have suffered several casualties.

At Patrol Base Buman, we are met by an officer and a sergeant who are in charge of the dozen Australians at this tiny outpost. They haven't seen a barber or a laundry for more than a month and aren't likely to any time soon. They wear grimy combat uniforms in the brown-green camouflage pattern normally used back in Australia. They've rejected their issued light-

coloured desert fatigues because, as a Digger tells me, they ‘stand out like dogs’ balls’ in the green zone.

The living conditions are spartan. A rough wooden building provides cramped working spaces. The men sleep on stretchers jammed close together in another low-ceilinged room, its roof topped with sandbags to protect them from incoming mortar rounds. There’s a pungent smell of infrequently washed bodies, sweaty field gear and dirt. Despite the cramped living quarters, most of the men have found a way to make their meagre space their own, with photos tacked to wooden posts or mementos from home wedged in the wire mesh of the Hesco walls near their sleeping bags.

They hand me a cup of coffee and brief me on the local situation, which remains tense. The officer in charge expresses dismay at the lethargy of the Afghan soldiers who occupy a small separate outpost not far away, called Patrol Base Khyber. Their training is progressing slowly. The Afghans are reluctant to venture out unless prompted by the Australians. When I ask how long before the ANA soldiers will be capable on their own, the young officer nods to his sergeant to indicate that he should answer. The sergeant puffs out a breath and ponders briefly before answering. ‘A couple of years, probably more,’ he says. It sounds pessimistic but it will prove to be an astute estimate.

Emerging from the bunker of the operations room, I ask if I can climb up on the Hesco wall to get a better look at the surroundings. We all climb up on top of the earth-filled wall. The scene is typical of other green zones in the valleys of Uruzgan. The trees are pushing out new leaves and the crops are yet to mature. Mud walls, stone fences, orchards, irrigation aqueducts and huddled buildings are everywhere, creating a network of barriers to visibility and movement. Come summer, infantry patrols will be even more difficult, when every tree and field will be dense with greenery.

As I am about to leave, they introduce me to a dirty brown dog, little more than a pup, that they've adopted. I squat down to pat the mongrel and it immediately sinks its teeth into my wrist.

'Maybe our mascot is a Taliban sympathiser,' says one soldier.

'Nah,' says another with a cheeky grin, 'he just doesn't like officers.'

I smile back, rubbing at the puncture marks in my wrist. 'When I'm lying in hospital with rabies, I'll think of you guys,' I tell them.

'Cheers, sir!' says one of the soldiers. 'Can you send us some nurses?'

Half an hour later we approach a section of road that skirts a prominent mountain ridge. It juts out into the valley, forming the eastern shoulder of the Baluchi Pass. The road crawls around its tip, with a drop to the river below and steep cliffs above. There is no way to get off the road. It's a perfect ambush site or location for an IED. Jason Blain lifts his feet off the floor and props them on the edge of the opposing seat. Good idea, I think, and do likewise. 'Stay in their tracks, mate,' the vehicle commander tells the driver. We are positioned in the middle of the convoy for a reason: the ASLAVs and Bushmasters ahead of us are there to take the hit rather than us, if our group strikes an IED.

Patrol Base Qudus looks a lot like its cousin, Patrol Base Buman, except that it's larger, holds more troops and dominates its surroundings from a ridge above the valley. Australian and Afghan soldiers live within its perimeter. I receive another tactical brief and am impressed by how quickly our troops have come to know the area. The names of villages and their *maliks* rattle off their tongues with casual familiarity, along with illuminating descriptions of tribal tensions, the status of the local economy, the attitudes of the population—the 'atmospherics' as the soldiers say—and the state of the insurgency in the valley.

The security situation varies markedly from place to place. The further north you go up the valley, the worse the situation gets. To illustrate the

point, the intelligence officer points to one triangular-shaped area between the hills and the river, then to another just to its north, on the other side of a prominent ridge the Diggers call the Sphinx (a reference to the bluff that overlooked their forebears at Anzac Cove in 1915). ‘The headman in this area is pretty much on side,’ he says, tapping the map, ‘but the minute our guys go north of the Sphinx it’s on for young and old.’

It’s something I will learn applies to the whole province and to Afghanistan more generally: that there’s no one-size-fits-all solution to the many problems besetting the place. It is a valuable insight. Afghanistan is a complex aggregate of social, cultural, economic and security issues.

An hour later Lieutenant Colonel Blain and I stand in a rough line of infantrymen, ready to conduct a foot patrol into the valley below. Following the directions of the officer in charge, I have stripped my uniform of my badges of rank. I have left my wallet and notebook, with the sensitive information it contains, in my backpack where I’ll sleep tonight. A corporal walks down the line, checking our gear and making sure we are wearing our dog tags—these metal discs will help identify our remains if we are killed.

We are to be accompanied by a group of Afghan soldiers, but there is a problem. Several of them have fronted without their web gear. The section commander sends them back to get it, which seems to offend them. When they return, most are without hats or helmets. One *askari*—an ANA soldier—drags his rifle by the muzzle, the butt leaving a long scuff mark in the rocky dirt of the compound. There is a distinct lack of enthusiasm among the Afghans for the mission. Through the interpreter, our patrol commander speaks encouragingly but firmly to the Afghan sergeant, who, like the men under him, is illiterate, has only a thin veneer of training and is far from his home in the north of the country. These are the men our soldiers have to work with. Most of the ANA solders here are ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks who

speak Dari. The people in Uruzgan are Pashtuns who speak Pashto. The ANA soldiers sometimes need interpreters to communicate with the locals.

As we pass through the entrance of the base, I follow the example of the Digger in front as he cocks his rifle, loading a round into the chamber, ready to go. We descend a steep slope towards the tilled fields in a well-spaced single file. The elevation of the base provides good observation but it also means that every patrol is exposed to watching eyes from the moment it steps off. The military police warrant officer, Tony, who is responsible for my close personal protection, stays close behind me. It is his job to keep me alive if we hit trouble.

On the edge of the green zone, we pass through a wide alley between mud-walled buildings. As we emerge, we confront a narrow footbridge across a 2-metre-wide aqueduct. Restricted points like this are often used to place IEDs. The Australian soldiers avoid the earth-topped log bridge, wading through the knee-deep water, but the Afghan soldier ahead of me walks blithely across, without incident. We haven’t seen any locals yet but this is a well-used track; I decide to follow the Afghan, looking carefully for any sign of recently disturbed earth that might conceal a bomb.

We descend further, pushing through thick shrubs fringing a stream that I jump across, using a water-worn rock as a stepping stone. The only sound is the crunch of our boots on the gravel. The nearest Australian soldiers drift in and out of view as we pass through the trees, moving slowly but with purpose, constantly glancing across to check the flanks, weapons ready.

Crossing a field already bright green with young wheat, we scale a low rocky wall. As I drop onto the pathway on the other side, I see one of the Diggers squatting against the wall nearby, rifle at his shoulder, covering down the pathway. He looks over his shoulder at me and says quietly, ‘Okay, boss?’ I give a thumbs up and follow the rest of the patrol towards a

group of mud buildings—the village of Sajawul. Inside the cluster of structures I see local children for the first time, silent and big-eyed as they stand shyly in a doorway. I lift a hand from my rifle and wave. They just stare back.

A little further on some adults rise to meet us, and I am introduced to the village *Khan*—headman or chief—named Haji Habibullah. He is a revered man; the ‘Haji’ title means that he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Pulling off my dark ballistic glasses so he can see my eyes, I shake his hand and am rewarded with a smile from a weathered, friendly face. When my rank and status is explained, it is instantly deemed that we must have *chai*.

Chai is tea, but it is also a ceremony, an expression of friendship and hospitality. Haji Habibullah takes my hand and leads me to a grassy spot below his house, where a beautifully patterned blanket is spread for us. There is a flurry of activity as other adults are summoned and kettles of boiling water are produced. We are joined by some of Haji Habibullah’s sons and two of his grandchildren, a girl and a boy, both with severe crew-cuts in preparation for the hot summer. We sit cross-legged in a smiling circle, sipping the scalding tea and eating dried chickpeas.

Our talk is of small things. I ask about the crops, about the light snowfalls of the past winter and the shortage of melt-water for crops, the health of his family and the state of his goats. I tell him about the farm where I lived as a boy, and he asks about my family. He congratulates me when I say that my wife and I have two fine sons. I ask permission to take photographs of the children. I show the children their image on the back of my camera and they giggle and squirm in embarrassment at being the centre of attention. Around us, water is gurgling in an ancient aqueduct, past a simple but elegant mud structure like a gazebo, while below us the river snakes along its wide gravel bed. Beyond the river lies another strip of

greenery beneath the stupendous, nearly vertical mountain wall that defines the eastern side of the valley. The rough beauty of it is extraordinary, as is the contrast of this peaceful, welcoming encounter, set against a backdrop of the violence that engulfs Afghanistan.

Later, our patrol makes its way through a village where there are no smiles. The men squat against a wall, watching us with dark eyes. A group of teenage boys, gathered near the village water pump, say little in response to my greetings and attempts at conversation. One bolder kid asks me for money. He is almost fighting age. I wonder when he will take up a gun, or if he has already. A little further on, the patrol commander sends a small team off on a separate but parallel route, to clear an empty aqueduct that would make a good spot to ambush the patrol.

We encounter the first of several crops of opium poppies, with some plants already showing the delicate pink flowers that will become the seed pods from which the raw opium is extracted. The rectangular fields of pink poppy flowers are everywhere in Uruzgan, and provide the main source of income for many rural communities. The illicit opium trade is also an important part of the Taliban's income stream. Our troops have no mandate to destroy the poppy crops, which would plunge whole regions into poverty and be resisted by the insurgents and the local population alike. Instead, we walk between plants whose dried and processed sap will eventually make its way to junkies in Europe, America and Australia. We tread carefully, trying to avoid knocking down the plants and attracting the ire of a farmer who is watching from a perch on a stone wall.

Climbing out of the valley, we emerge from a line of trees and suddenly we are back in the barren *dasht* of the hills. The transition is instant; one minute we are pushing through greenery, the next we are crunching over bare gravel. We avoid the dirt road, an obvious location for IEDs, and walk on the rocky slope above it. At one point we stop while the patrol

commander speaks to a passing local. I use the time to catch my breath—I am not as fit as the young soldiers—and turn to gaze north along the Baluchi Valley. I think of Haji Habibullah, who has lived here all his life. I smile to myself as I recall the kindly patriarch surrounded by his family, his neatly tended buildings and his well-managed fields.

In a few months from now, Australian soldiers patrolling near his family's compound one dark night will come across a confused and foolish Afghan man who points a gun at them. Despite repeated warnings, he refuses to lower the weapon. The Australian soldier confronting him does exactly what he has been trained to do. He shoots and kills the man.

It is one of Haji Habibullah's sons.

27

TRAVELS

I never wanted to see Iraq again and yet here I am, walking down the stairs of a passenger jet at Baghdad International on a cool February day, dressed as a civilian, worried about the fate of my luggage and curious about what awaits. My constant companion from 2006, anxiety, greets me on the tarmac.

While Afghanistan is my main concern, I'm here because it is part of my patch. I have command of two missions involving Australian troops in Iraq. One is Operation Riverbank, comprising two officers deployed under the flag of the United Nations. The other is Operation Kruger, made up of about a hundred soldiers protecting the Australian embassy and providing secure transport for the ambassador. This is the first of several such trips I will make over the coming year.

The terminal is crowded, chaotic and choked with cigarette smoke. The Customs lines move along at a bureaucratic crawl although a local bigwig in a shiny suit is ushered past by fawning attendants, has his passport stamped in two seconds and sails off towards the exit. My line inches on. Ahead is a family, possibly north African, clutching their possessions in bundles tied with lengths of string. What hell have they come from, I wonder, if Iraq offers a better life? To one side, a flabby Iraqi security officer in an ill-fitting uniform watches me with suspicion. I'm just another foreigner trying to get into Iraq. I don't feel like a returning victor.

An hour later I am reunited with my bag and am met by my escorts, who lead me towards the ASLAV that will take me to our embassy in the Green Zone. This is to be the last time these combat vehicles will make an official run down Route Irish: they've been deemed too warlike in the new era of Iraqi sovereignty and are to be replaced with armoured civilian four-wheel drives.

At the embassy compound I am introduced to the military contingent and tour its quarters, a worn four-storey building that was once part of the combat surgical hospital. This is where I came nursing a damaged shoulder after the rocket attack on the prime minister's compound. Across the road is where helicopters carrying the wounded once landed, having passed over my hut in the grounds of the Republican Palace. The landing pad is abandoned now and littered with rubbish and unwanted equipment.

My meeting with the ambassador, Bob Tyson, is enjoyable and informative. He says while the violence has decreased dramatically, Iraqi civilians are still being killed. He laments the loss of interest in Iraq by Australians and our government, and the missed opportunities for trade and other exchanges. I tell him Defence wants to wind down our military presence in Baghdad and replace the soldiers with civilian contractors. This is acknowledged, but we differ on the pace of the planned withdrawal: the diplomats like having soldiers around, and who can blame them? I discover that we share a passion for Collingwood Football Club. His Excellency and I exchange views on our team's chances in this year's competition and the burden of being a Magpies supporter, the constant butt of barbs and bad jokes.

In the late afternoon, I climb the stairs to the flat roof of the accommodation block to look out over Baghdad. A soft light covers the city. The familiar landmarks are all there: the monuments, mosques and palaces. A wave of *déjà vu* hits me and for a moment it feels like I never

left. My chest tightens and just as I feel a sudden urge to find cover, I become aware of something else, a kind of silence. There are no popping AK-47 rounds, no thumps or bangs, no sirens and no beating helicopters. All I hear is the mutter of traffic and the ordinary sounds of a city. I loosen my grip on the metal rail and breathe out. Relax, I tell myself. My companions, some officers and soldiers of the security detachment, are chatting among themselves nearby and I walk over to join them.

I'm back in Baghdad, but it's a different place.

Over the following days I call on senior US officers and diplomats, to receive briefings. Despite spikes of violence, the consensus is that things are improving, the government is functioning a little better and the Iraqi security forces are becoming more competent. As I crisscross the city I see evidence of this: Route Irish is patrolled by properly uniformed and equipped Iraqi soldiers and policemen, the concrete T-walls are painted in bright, cheery colours, traffic flows freely, with few US military vehicles to be seen, and people gather at bus stops and markets without apparent fear of suicide bombers. The Republican Palace, once bustling with Coalition soldiers, is now empty and somewhat forlorn; it has been handed back to the Iraqis but they have found no use for it yet.

I look at all these changes with mixed feelings, but mostly with grudging satisfaction. My email home to Jane that evening says:

> What a difference to when I was here in 2006. The place looks cleaner and seems better organised, the wreckage of destroyed vehicles is gone, the roads have been fixed in places, and the tanks at the checkpoints on Route Irish are manned by Iraqi soldiers who actually seem to know what they're doing. It's so quiet, no booms of explosions or rattle of gunfire. Maybe all that bloodshed and pain was worth it after all. I'd like to think so. Perhaps my visits to Baghdad this year will put a few demons to rest.

However, that night I’m visited by familiar, unwelcome dreams, which startle me from sleep. I lie awake, listening to Baghdad through the wall of my room, remembering.

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As well as visits to Iraq, I spend days at sea aboard each of the three Royal Australian Navy frigates as they cycle through their counter-terrorism and counter-piracy deployments to the Middle East: HMAS *Stuart*, HMAS *Parramatta* and HMAS *Melbourne*.

My time aboard HMAS *Stuart* gives me an insight into the rigours of life on a warship. The ship, with its crew, is an extraordinarily complex organism, governed by centuries of hard-learnt lessons about how things get done at sea. Warships are full of high-tech gadgetry and yet are reliant on men and women to monitor every process—the sea will punish inattention or carelessness swiftly and severely. The crew lives in cramped conditions that no civilian employer would dare offer and they work in a ceaseless cycle of ‘watches’—time spent on duty—interspersed with other tasks and drills and not much sleep. I am struck by the heavy responsibility and sense of isolation the captain must bear; he commands absolutely, but is far from home in a strategically sensitive area—an island of Australian sovereignty in waters filled with commercial vessels, other warships, hundreds of unidentified fishing *dhows* and a sprinkling of well-armed pirates.

I get out to the frigates either by helicopter or launch, the latter delivering me and my party to the ship drenched to the skin. At different times I double as a hose man fighting a mock fire below decks, serve food in the galley, assist in winching a hovering helicopter down onto the pitching flight deck, am coached through maintenance work on the massive engine, take a turn on the bridge ordering course corrections and speed

changes, join the team wrestling with a huge fuel hose connected to an adjoining tanker while under steam, and fire every weapon system on board, including the main gun.

One activity aboard HMAS *Parramatta* leaves an unwelcome legacy when I badger the captain to allow me to act as the rescue swimmer during a man-overboard drill. Dressed in a dive suit, mask and fins, I leap from the deck into the dark-grey sea off Somalia on the command, ‘Swimmer away!’ The drop is further than it looks and I am travelling at a fair clip when I hit the water. During the descent I have allowed one of the long fins to deviate from the vertical position I had been told to maintain. The impact catches the errant fin, wrenching it sideways. As I pull myself towards the surface, pain is shooting from my ankle. Following the guidance of the lookouts, I swim towards the dummy that simulates a lost sailor, each beat of my fins bringing a flash of pain.

I grasp the dummy and signal that the sailors at the other end of the rope attached to my waist should haul me in. The line snaps taut as they heave, and more pain hits but from a new location. I have allowed the rope to go between my legs and my testicles are being crushed. I am clearly not cut out for this work. Rolling out of my predicament, I am drawn alongside the grey wall of the hull, at which point the line is attached to a winch and I am dragged up and dumped dripping onto the deck to the applause of the crew. My genitals are aching and my ankle is now burning with pain but pride forbids me revealing the damage.

By the time I put my boots back on, I can barely close the laces around my left ankle, which is already the size of a small melon. Thanks to my incompetence I have badly torn several tendons, which will remain inflamed and painful for months as I repeatedly aggravate the injury jumping from helicopters, climbing into armoured vehicles or stumbling over rocks in the valleys of Uruzgan. Despite my fascination with all

aspects of shipboard life and my deep admiration for the crews of our frigates, my visits confirm absolutely that I chose the right arm of the defence force.

I travel to several countries across the Middle East, meeting counterparts and building relationships. In Jordan I have discussions with officials of the Royal Court and call on the commander of their army. I visit Oman and Kuwait. In Bahrain, where I spend time with an Australian Navy team that commands a Coalition naval task force, I also meet the American admiral in charge of the massive US Fifth Fleet—the new commander, Mark Fox, was my room-mate for a time when we served together in Baghdad in 2006.

One visit to Bahrain produces an unexpected encounter. Several legends of American aerospace history are making a morale-boosting tour of US bases in the region, and I am invited by the commander to join a private function in their honour. Thus I find myself swapping stories with some heroes of my youth: Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon; Jim Lovell, commander of the ill-fated *Apollo 13* moon mission; and Gene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon in 1972 as commander of *Apollo 17*. Cernan tells me how he scratched his daughter Tracy's initials in the moon dust near their landing point before they lifted off; they'll be there for eons. All three men are remarkably humble, engaging and interested in Australia's efforts in Afghanistan.

Much of my military diplomacy effort centres on the United Arab Emirates, whose willingness to host Australian forces is critical to our mission in the region. I meet the ruler of Dubai emirate, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, on two occasions: once in the company of the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and again when I invite the sheikh to visit our facilities at the al-Minhad airbase. He impresses me as someone with a sophisticated

view of the world. I also expend a lot of energy smoothing ruffled feathers when, inevitably, one of the thousands of Australian service personnel living at or passing through our base does something stupid to offend the Emiratis—getting drunk or allegedly ‘leering’ at local women. The base commander and his troops are very tolerant and turn a blind eye to some indiscretions, but we severely test their patience once or twice. Such incidents have potentially strategic implications: the Emirates have previously thrown other western military forces out of the country for offending their sensibilities. Happily, goodwill prevails and disaster is averted.

The most interesting trips I make are to Pakistan.

One visit is in the company of Duncan Lewis, at that time Australia’s National Security Adviser. Duncan is a former army general and Special Forces commander. He was also my instructor when I studied at the Army Staff College. His itinerary takes in meetings with many high-ranking officials and military leaders, including the powerful chief of the Pakistan army, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. During the discussion the general asks for my views on progress in Afghanistan and an assessment of cross-border issues.

I raise several matters: the problem of illegal movement of weapons and fighters into Afghanistan; the importance of road access through Pakistan for Coalition convoys; and a planned visit to the port of Karachi by one of our frigates. In turn, I ask for his assessment of the counter-insurgency campaign being fought by the Pakistan army in the country’s predominantly Pashtun regions bordering Afghanistan, where sympathy for the Taliban is strong. The chain-smoking general delivers a positive account of his troops’ progress and offers to arrange for me to tour the area on a subsequent visit, which I accept. When I later brief my chain-of-command and intelligence advisers on the offer, I receive dire warnings not to go, or

risk almost certain attack or abduction. In the end, events in Afghanistan override my travel plans and I am forced to renege on the invitation, to my great regret: few westerners get to see that part of the world anymore.

Our meeting with a senior member of the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, known as the ISI, provides an unexpected insight into the difficulties plaguing the region. The ISI is the largest and most influential of Pakistan's security agencies, and it has long been suspected of covertly supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. The officer briefing us, an ISI general in a dark suit, dismisses out of hand any suggestion of their helping the Taliban and paints a rosy picture of the security situation. In response to Duncan Lewis's polite but probing questions, he relaxes the rhetoric slightly and makes the only comment of value in the hour-long briefing. 'Pakistan and Afghanistan,' says the ISI man, 'will still be neighbours long after the international community has had its fill and leaves the region. The Taliban, or their successors, will also still be here when you all go home.' He smiles, and then adds, 'That is the reality we deal with.'

It explains a lot, I think. His statement might be worth remembering in considering our departure from Afghanistan, when that day comes.

My other visit to Pakistan comes in the wake of devastating floods that swamp 20 per cent of the country, affecting more than 20 million people, and killing and injuring thousands. Australia dispatches a seventy-strong medical team to central Pakistan, and I accompany my boss, Lieutenant General Mark Evans, on a visit to assess the operation. Our visit to the medical team, a joint effort by the ADF and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), is conducted in stifling humidity. We gain some relief from the energy-sapping heat during a helicopter flight to view some of the affected areas, but the sights below us are utterly depressing. The flood waters have scoured the countryside, sweeping away everything not firmly fixed to the ground. Large areas remain under water,

but those villages now above the waterline have been stripped of their animals, farm implements and crops. In places, bare rock is visible where the topsoil has been carried away from once fertile fields. Bloated animal carcasses float everywhere; thankfully we are spared the sight of human bodies, but there are plenty down there, we are told. Here and there we see people picking through the mud for lost possessions or family members. They think we are delivering supplies and run towards us as we pass, arms raised. We fly on.

The Australian relief team is based outside the city of Kot Addu in central Punjab province. Olive-green tents and camouflage uniforms identify the military component; the AusAID team comprises doctors and health professionals, most of whom have volunteered their time and skills. After central briefings and a tour of the camp, I slip away from the main group and head for one of the treatment areas. I find brightly dressed Pakistani women and their children, all seeking medical aid. The children are hungry and sick. I try to speak to one woman but she is mute with shyness; instead I reach out and cup the head of her infant child, who looks to be at death's door. I tell her that her baby is beautiful, which, when translated, finally elicits a smile. I also tell her that I hope the child recovers. The mother only shrugs.

When the visit is over I write to Jane, 'The medical team is mostly treating gastroenteritis, cholera and respiratory diseases, plus many skin infections from wading through filthy water. The babies are a sad sight. Many will die if they can't keep a lid on disease, a big ask in these conditions. Our guys here are great, especially the AusAID doctors. I ate a meal with our Pakistani army hosts, which probably means I'll soon have my own case of gastro.' Two months after they are deployed, the medical team head home, having treated more than 11,000 people. My dose of the trots lasts a week.

These visits, and others, are interesting and profitable, but I recognise they are diversions from the main game, Afghanistan, where a deadly summer is unfolding.

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FIRST BLOOD

I emerge into the arrivals lounge of Darwin airport after almost two days of travelling from the Middle East. It is the afternoon of 3 June 2010 and I am home on leave for the marriage of our youngest son Daniel and his fiancée Michelle. I search the faces of the waiting crowd and finally spot Jane, beaming. I haven't seen her for five months. We embrace for a long time, absorbing each other. It feels so good to be home. We have ten days together before I return to the Middle East.

I am tired from the journey and run-down after a hectic five months that have brought a constant stream of challenges and rewards as well as a few disappointments.

The soldiers under my care have suffered gunshot wounds and been battered by roadside bombs. I have stood at the bedsides of many, offering my encouragement and listening to their accounts. They have been inspiring. To a man, they've wanted to go back to help their mates, even when their injuries have been serious.

The training of Afghan soldiers has started to gain some traction, but laziness and poor discipline still occasionally crop up. Patience is in high demand. We are making good progress in the province, killing or capturing insurgents and uncovering their weapons. My Australian political and military masters are hypersensitive to any possible misstep or misbehaviour by our troops, so every potentially negative episode, big or small, costs many hours in reports, investigations and follow-up action. Some days it

feels as if I am on the phone to Canberra every time a shepherd in Uruzgan loses a goat. The hunger for information is insatiable, the microscope constantly focused on every move.

The impending departure of Dutch forces from Uruzgan has become a major concern as we work to find a replacement force to partner us in the province. Despite meetings with General McChrystal and many other senior Coalition officers, the issue remains unresolved.

I have wrestled with scores of problems: improving the runway at Tarin Kot; fixing errors in the pay system; delving into tribal and political feuds in Uruzgan; replacing Bushmasters damaged by roadside bombs; fighting for more American helicopter support; planning VIP visits and acting as their escort; convincing my chain of command and the government to allow our Special Forces to operate beyond Uruzgan; struggling to get better equipment for our soldiers working alongside the Afghans; trialling medical clinics for Afghan women and girls; managing detainees taken from the battlefield; and shaping combat operations in line with our national objectives.

All these concerns fall away when Jane and I arrive at the resort she has booked, where I have a happy reunion with our two sons, Dave and Daniel, and a dozen other family members.

I've been on the ground for less than an hour and am fielding a barrage of questions from relatives when Dave takes a call on his mobile. 'Yes sir, no problem, sir,' I hear him say and assume that someone from his army unit is calling. Then he hands the phone to me. 'Dad, it's the Chief of the Defence Force.' I take it and walk a few paces away from my family, who are watching on intently.

Angus Houston asks where I am. I cautiously reply that I've just arrived in Darwin on leave. He wants to discuss something that occurred a few days ago when one of our soldiers based at Tarin Kot got drunk and

apparently overdosed on an opiate. The incident was messy but manageable and I had left the Middle East confident that all the right processes, including a formal investigation, were underway.

‘John,’ says the boss, ‘I need you to go back to Afghanistan to personally take charge of sorting this out. I know you’ve got good people on the job but I think this needs your special leadership skills.’

It’s not flattery—Angus Houston is a man who means what he says—but the idea of going straight back is a bit of a shock and I question the need. The chief hears me out politely but is worried the incident might have wider implications and wants me to take charge. ‘Sir, I’m here for the wedding of my son, the day after tomorrow. Can I go back after that?’

There is a short pause before he replies, ‘Of course. You’ve got forty-eight hours.’

Two days later I have a new daughter-in-law and an airline ticket back to the Middle East. I fly four hours to Sydney, wait a few more hours then board a flight to Dubai. Seventeen sleepless hours later—I have never been able to sleep on planes—the sun is creeping over the horizon as I am driven out to my headquarters at al-Minhad airbase in the UAE. I change into my combat uniform and pack a small bag. Trudging to the flight line, I catch a C-130 Hercules to Afghanistan and a couple of hours later I land at Tarin Kot in a cloud of dust and 40-degree heat, feeling light-headed with fatigue. My body clock has sprung its springs—I have been through seventeen time zones in five days. My watch says it is the morning of Monday, 7 June.

Soon, I am immersed in the problem that has brought me back, doing what commanders do when there has been a cock-up: getting the facts, closing loopholes, revising policy, issuing orders and kicking backsides. Around 1130 someone passes me a message from the commanding officer of Mentoring Task Force 1. The note says there’s been an incident out in

one of the valleys and that I should come to his headquarters as soon as possible.

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Earlier that day, as I was walking through the exit gate at Dubai airport, a group of Australian soldiers walked out the gate of Patrol Base Wali, in Uruzgan's Mirabad Valley. The patrol, one of many mounted by MTF1 that day, is made up of a platoon of around thirty infantrymen, a medic, two combat engineers and one dog.

The infantry soldiers and the medic are part of the Brisbane-based 6th Battalion, a unit with a proud history of service in Vietnam, East Timor and Iraq. The two engineers—sappers as they are called, a reference to the ancient art of digging trenches or 'saps' under fire—are Jacob 'Snowy' Moerland and Darren Smith. They are from the 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment, also based in Brisbane, a unit that traces its lineage back to World War I.

Blond, blue-eyed and a 21-year-old extrovert, Snowy wields a mine detector, a sensing device set on the end of a metre-long rod used to check the ground ahead for the metal in buried explosive devices. Smithy, twenty-six, dark-haired and more serious, is closely followed by his explosive detection dog, Herbie, a handsome black-and-tan kelpie with a good nose for bombs. Both men have loved ones waiting for them back in Australia. Snowy has a fiancée, Kezia. Smithy has a wife, Angela, and a two-and-a-half-year-old son, Mason.

The patrol—with the radio call sign Echo One One Alpha—is heading for a cluster of villages called Sorkh Lez, an insurgent stronghold a couple of kilometres west of their patrol base.

By the time I am in Afghan airspace, Echo One One Alpha has made several discoveries. Among the buildings of the targeted compounds Snowy, Smithy and Herbie have excelled themselves, helping to locate three hidden caches of weapons and munitions—a couple of thousand rounds of ammunition, twenty-three rocket-propelled grenades and five mortar rounds. It's a good find. Their company commander, Major Jason Groat, congratulates them over the radio from his command bunker at Patrol Base Wali, where he is monitoring the progress of two patrols that morning.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, when I am at Tarin Kot delving into the event that summoned me back, the patrol leaves the compound and begins its journey back to Patrol Base Wali, taking a different route to the one used on the approach to Sorkh Lez. Snowy and Smithy are out in front, as engineers usually are, clearing the way along an earthen footpath running beside one of the many irrigation canals. Snowy hears the telltale buzz from his mine detector, indicating there is something metallic buried in the dirt in front of him. He calls to Sapper Darren Smith that he's found something. Smithy summons Herbie, who is off the leash and searching the field to one side, before moving up behind Snowy, who is now leaning forward to examine the ground at his feet. The two men are only a metre or so apart and Herbie is beside his master when the improvised explosive device detonates.

Sapper Jacob Moerland is killed instantly, the life ripped out of his body in a heartbeat. Herbie is blown up and away from the seat of the blast, already dead as his torn body is flung like a rag doll into the field where he has just been running. Darren Smith is blown backwards and to one side, landing in the water-filled aqueduct alongside the path. There is a moment of stunned silence, then the patrol is galvanised into action. While some infantry soldiers move into positions looking outwards, ready for an

expected attack and searching for other explosive devices, others rush to the blast site. There is brief confusion—Smithy is nowhere to be seen. Then someone realises he's in the water and men plunge in to pull him back onto the track and begin trying to control his bleeding. The medic rushes forward, pulling his medical bag from his back.

The medic is Lance Corporal Mark Hughes-Brown, known to all as HB. He knows that Snowy is gone, and turns to Darren Smith. Smithy is struggling to get up, unaware of his terrible wounds. In his shock and confusion he fights with the man trying to save his life, knocking away helping hands. HB tries to calm him, but Smithy tells them he needs to get back on the job, checking for more IEDs. With the wounded man still struggling, HB yells for assistance from the soldiers nearby, who help to restrain Smithy. HB realises the patrol members not searching for more explosives are all glancing anxiously at the men on the ground. He tells one man nearby, a sergeant, to hold Snowy's hand so that the rest of the patrol might think he is still okay. HB quickly returns his focus to Darren Smith's injuries, battling to stop the bleeding using tourniquets and pressure. He administers morphine, to calm the wounded man and ease his pain. Nearby, several Afghan men stand watching in silence. Some children are laughing and shouting.

Back at Patrol Base Wali, the radios are providing a running commentary. Major Groat receives a message from Echo One One Alpha that there are 'no vital signs' from Sapper Moerland—he is dead. He is told that Sapper Smith is critical, a Category Alpha casualty. An aero-medical evacuation helicopter has already been summoned from Tarin Kot; the American crew red-lines the engines to get into the air and head towards the Mirabad Valley.

When the helicopter arrives at the wheat field the patrol has marked with coloured smoke, HB is still working on Smithy, doing CPR to keep his

heart going and air moving in his lungs. At one point HB has his head close to Darren's face when he briefly becomes more alert and says, 'I love my family. I'm sorry.' Over the roar of the helicopter engines, HB shouts at the medic on board to keep the CPR going. This is for the benefit of the other patrol members hefting the stretcher into the aircraft. Darren Smith is dead.

By the time I reach the headquarters of MTF1, in another part of the Tarin Kot base, the helicopter carrying Darren Smith has landed. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Blain, gives me the news: two engineers are dead, one killed instantly and another succumbing to what I will later hear a doctor describe as 'non-survivable wounds'. It is almost a year since the last Australian fatality in Afghanistan. It is also the first time since 1971, near the end of the Vietnam War, that Australia has suffered multiple combat deaths in a single incident. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, another eight Coalition soldiers also die today, 7 June 2010. I lock the date in my memory.

Inside Lieutenant Colonel Blain's headquarters there is grim acceptance of the loss. There have been dozens of close calls since MTF1 commenced operations in Uruzgan, but everyone knew that one day their luck would run out. The staff are busy but the usual hubbub of voices is absent. I tell Jason how sorry I am that he has lost two of his soldiers. I shake his hand, a meagre attempt at comfort. His businesslike manner cannot hide his sadness.

As I walk through the headquarters to the austere steel-walled office I use when I'm visiting, I say a word or two to the staff officers I've come to know well. One of the female officers is red-eyed and the blokes are very glum. There's not much to say. It's not the time for emotional comments: this is the headquarters of a combat unit with people still outside the wire all over the province. We will grieve soon enough, but right now we need to attend to the living.

The wheels of the military reporting system start turning immediately. From my temporary office I telephone my boss back in Australia, Lieutenant General Evans, and tell him the basics: IED strike in the Mirabad Valley, two dead plus an explosive detection dog. Sapper Moerland killed outright; Sapper Smith was dead when the helicopter landed at Tarin Kot; no other casualties. It's all he needs to know for the moment; he'll be on the phone to the Chief of the Defence Force as soon as we hang up. The Minister for Defence and the Chief of the Army will also know very soon.

Back home, people are now racing to find and inform the next of kin of the two dead soldiers before the story hits the media, as it will sooner or later. To help maintain control of the information going back to Australia, my communications team pulls the plug on all outward connections at both Tarin Kot and al-Minhad in the UAE, including landline telephones, mobiles and emails. Only the line necessary for me to pass information back to Australia is kept open. This is standard procedure. Having passed the initial report to my commander, I now have a maximum of fifty-five minutes before I must provide an update with more complete information.

My follow-up report to Mark Evans fleshes out the details slightly. I am able to describe the nature of the patrol, its composition, details of the timing and sequence of the incident, the status of the rest of the patrol and the location of the two bodies—three, counting Herbie. He offers me a few words of consolation, which I appreciate. I'm already feeling the weight of responsibility for their deaths.

By the time I make my second call to General Evans, it is evening back in Australia. Notification teams including an officer and a chaplain are making their way to the homes of the Moerland and Smith families. These teams exist in each capital city and major regional centre, drawn from

officers posted to the area who are on call to carry out the dreadful duty of passing on the worst possible news.

At one point in the afternoon I am sitting with Jason Blain in his office when the telephone on his desk rings. I hear him say, ‘Of course I’ll hold for the prime minister.’ It is Kevin Rudd, who is yet to be dismissed from the top job. He expresses his sympathies and asks what happened. Jason tells him what he can and talks a bit about the two Diggers. When he mentions Smithy’s little boy, Mason, there’s a moment of silence on the other end. He asks Jason to tell his soldiers how sorry everyone in Australia is about the losses. Jason asks if the PM would like to speak to me, thanks Mr Rudd for his call and concern, and hands the phone over. We talk for several minutes, during which I answer questions about the impact on the task force and what happens next. I outline the process of repatriation and hazard a guess that the two soldiers will be home on the weekend. Later, Jason and I talk about the call; the prime minister was sad and sincere. Lieutenant Colonel Blain relates the PM’s telephone message to many of his soldiers over the coming days.

Later that day, I field a call from someone at the Headquarters of Joint Operations Command, where my boss is the commander. I am told there is angst in Canberra because no Afghan soldiers were on the patrol. It’s not a good look, they believe, and it may have strategically damaging ramifications. I am asked to find out why the patrol wasn’t partnered with Afghan soldiers.

I am terse. ‘Two things,’ I say to the officer sitting at a desk in another hemisphere. ‘First, I’m not going to start quizzing these guys while the bodies of their dead mates are still warm.’ The staff officer starts to reply but I talk over him. ‘Second, we are still working our way towards a situation where all patrols are partnered. There are times when Australians need to patrol on their own, on more demanding missions, to set the

conditions for training patrols involving the Afghans. That's your answer to the "strategic problem". Now stop annoying me; you're not helping.'

I hang up. He doesn't ring back.

I walk outside the MTF1 headquarters to stand alone for a few minutes on the rocky area in front of the entrance. Through the heat haze I can see the dark shimmer of the Mirabad Valley. In the hospital a short distance away lie the bodies of two men who woke this morning in that valley, pulled on their boots, strapped on their armour and hefted their weapons for a patrol aimed at making the valley safer. All I can think about are the scenes about to be played out in the lounge rooms of their families at home, as they learn the awful truth—the soldiers they farewelled to fight in Afghanistan have been killed in action.

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The following day, the acting Chief of the Defence Force, Lieutenant General David Hurley, announces the deaths to the Australian public. Mates of Snowy and Smithy are being brought to Tarin Kot from their patrol bases, so they can say goodbye. The Dutch have offered a large aircraft hangar, normally used to service Apache attack helicopters, as a makeshift chapel. My team is busy finalising arrangements for the soldiers' repatriation back to Australia. Adjustments are made to the airfreight schedule to ensure a Hercules transport aircraft is available to take them as far as the UAE; the air force is sending another aircraft from Australia for the long journey home. The mortuary facility at al-Minhad has been activated. Herbie's remains have been collected, to be sent home separately.

The remains of the two men are still in the small surgical hospital in the main base at Tarin Kot, where a guard is mounted by members of MTF1—the vigil will remain in place until they are carried to the farewell ceremony.

My senior military police investigator, Major John Cunningham, has taken custody of the bodies and is now responsible for preserving the chain of evidence for the coroner back in Australia. He forensically processes and photographs the bodies. Their identities have been confirmed. Given the nature of their deaths, it is necessary to x-ray the men's bodies to ensure there are no explosive remnants within. Their personal protective gear—body armour and helmet—is also checked to make sure it is free of ammunition, grenades or other explosives; their gear will also be sent home to help the coroner confirm the cause of death. The intent of all this is to smooth the way for the coroner in Australia, so there is no delay in releasing the fallen soldiers to their loved ones. The military police and medical personnel carry out these tasks with great care and respect, the hallmark of every step in the process of sending the boys back to their families.

On Wednesday, 9 June, their journey home begins.

Several hundred people are jammed into the Dutch Apache hangar, where the temperature is pushing 50 degrees. Two coffins rest on trestles in front of large framed photographs of Jacob Moerland and Darren Smith; Herbie, bright-eyed and ears erect, is in the same photo as Smithy. The service is led by the MTF1 chaplain, Alamoti Lavaki, an expatriate Tongan with a big heart and ready smile, known to everyone as Padre Al. Today there are no smiles. After a few words of his own, the padre invites Lieutenant Colonel Blain to speak, and as Jason rises from the chair beside mine I can see that he is wrestling with his emotions. Despite this, he speaks well, praising the bravery of the engineers and the sacrifice that Jacob and Darren have made. 'They were exceptional soldiers and exceptional men: dedicated, courageous and committed to their job,' he says, 'always in the front, leading the way.'

Then I am called forward to say a few words. Mounting the dais I look over the crowd filling the space and see pain on many of the faces. Close to the two caskets, on one side, are many of the friends of the dead men. Several sit with their elbows propped on their knees, holding bowed heads. I talk about the courage of men like Snowy and Darren, searching for and finding deadly devices, and so saving the lives and limbs of others. As I talk, there is a moment when my gaze falls again on the two caskets, bright with the colours of our flag, the white stars of the Southern Cross on show. I picture the men now lying before me as they were only a few days ago: full of life, leading other soldiers across dangerous ground, accepting the risk for their mates. My voice catches in my throat but I hold myself together.

Emotion is already high in the hot and crowded room when one of Darren Smith's mates, another dog handler named Corporal Craig Turnbull, steps up and shows us a childish drawing, all scribbles and lines. It has been done by Darren's young son for Anzac Day, with a message added by the boy's mother. Corporal Turnbull reads it: 'To my Daddy. Mason.' Around me, tears mingle with the sweat running down the faces of men who would normally scoff at displays of emotion.

With the service complete, the assembly files out into the blazing sunshine to join the hundreds of soldiers already lining the kilometre-long route to the Hercules waiting at the end of the runway. The two caskets are placed on the back of two long-range patrol vehicles used by our Special Forces. Padre Al stands at the head of the motorcade, with four pallbearers on each side of both laden vehicles. Behind each casket is the corporal in charge of the party. Jason Blain and I take our places behind the second vehicle. A signal is given and the procession moves off.

We advance between unbroken lines of service personnel—men and women, Australians, Dutch, Americans, Slovaks, French and Afghans. The procession slow-marches along the rough road, scuffing rocks and raising

small puffs of dust. The heat is intense; the uniforms of the pallbearers ahead of me are dark with perspiration. We stride on, in silence, while arm after arm is raised in a continuous ripple of salutes.

When we approach the gravel aircraft parking bay, the pallbearers lift the two coffins from the vehicles and we commence the final leg. The troops at the end of the lines are the men who knew Snowy and Smithy best. The two caskets are borne directly into the belly of the waiting Hercules, which the crew has prepared with a huge Australian flag strung across the width of the hold. The coffins are lashed down and the pallbearers file out of the hold. Padre Al makes a final benediction and we all salute as the aircraft ramp is closed.

There is a final round of solemn handshakes, and Don Spinks, my regimental sergeant major (RSM), and I board the aircraft by the forward door, along with two soldiers who will accompany Jacob and Darren all the way back to Australia. The pilots start the engines and we taxi to the threshold; from my seat behind the pilots I can see hundreds still gathered, watching our departure. A few moments later the roaring engines lift us into the air. As we start to climb, the pilot triggers the flares designed to deflect heat-seeking missiles. They are ejected from the sides of the Hercules in brilliant fans of light. The sequence fires twice, one for each of the fallen soldiers in the hold.

During the flight across Afghanistan, through Pakistani airspace then onwards towards the UAE, I leave the flight deck and make my way back through the hold, ducking past the big flag screening the rear section. The Digger sitting with the caskets, one of an unbroken string of soldiers who have ensured that the two deceased soldiers have not been left alone from the time of their deaths, looks up. I lean close to shout above the drone of the engines that I’ll relieve him for a while; he nods and disappears forward.

I check the caskets, tugging on one of the flags to correct a wrinkle in the fabric and adjusting the position of the bayonet attached to the top of the other casket. Sitting alone beside the two caskets, I dwell on the loss of these two men. I had met Jacob Moerland, briefly, but I hadn't come across Darren Smith, who had only recently joined the task force. It doesn't matter: they are both my soldiers.

I ask myself if anything could have been done to prevent their deaths. I mentally review the equipment we have issued our service men and women, the drills they've been taught, the tactics and techniques they use when patrolling the valleys now far behind us. I can think of no omission or failing. But this does nothing to prevent the sense of guilt, which has been welling in me from the moment I heard the news. The rational part of me knows I am not directly responsible for their deaths, but the emotional part of my conscience keeps telling me that, as commander, I was entrusted with their lives. I have failed them and their families. I sit alone and weep.

Sometime later I signal to one of the soldiers in the forward area and he takes over the watch. As I clamber up the short, steep ladder to the flight deck I encounter Don Spinks. He looks at me, then says, 'All good, boss?' It is his standard enquiry to me when things are getting rough. We are old friends, having served together at various times during our careers. I try to say something but can't. I can feel my eyes prickling again. Don squeezes my shoulder, concern on his face, then leaves me be, making his way to the rear.

When we land at al-Minhad airbase we enact the procedure to take the two caskets from the hold, transfer them to waiting vehicles and deliver them to the new mortuary facility that I had hoped never to use. I had ordered rehearsals of this drill months ago, when I was aghast to learn there was no plan for this contingency—the expertise gained from the four combat losses in 2009 had been lost in the ceaseless cycle of replacements.

Now the men and women assigned to carry out the ceremony perform it flawlessly.

As I come down the ramp behind the caskets, I am surprised but very pleased to see the Defence Minister, John Faulkner, and the Chief of the Defence Force, Angus Houston, standing with the other officers assembled beside the aircraft; they were in Pakistan at the time of the IED strike and have changed their itinerary to be here. Angus Houston looks deeply sad. John Faulkner looks stricken.

My email to Jane that night is brief. ‘Just got back to the main base with our two fallen Diggers. Very tough day and I’ve shed a few tears. My heart breaks for the families. Love you, your John.’

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Two days later I enter the mortuary facility to carry out a task I dread but which I have resolved to do. I am here to confirm the identities of the dead soldiers and ensure they are placed correctly in the casket bearing their name. This will be the final identity check before they are flown back to Australia.

I am determined to do this in person, having been appalled by the chain of mistakes surrounding the accidental death of Private Jake Kovco in Iraq in 2006, which culminated in the wrong body being sent home to Australia. I was working at the US-led headquarters in Baghdad at the time, a distant observer of the debacle, but I had shared the dismay and shame of all Australian service personnel that such an egregious error could have occurred. On taking command, I had vowed that I would never allow such a blunder to happen on my watch.

Inside the morgue is Major John Cunningham, the military police investigator who has supervised the remains since they arrived in Tarin Kot.

Also present is Commander Simon Winder, a skilled doctor and a navy reservist who volunteered for service in the Middle East; he is my senior medical officer. Another doctor and nurse, from our own small hospital on the base, stand to one side.

The two dead men lie on stainless steel examination tables. Despite the heat outside, in here it is cool and quiet. In subdued tones, the two officers take me through the formal identification process. Working methodically and without haste, we compare identifying features and marks against their records, corroborating several proofs. Their wounds are noted but I do not dwell on these. In due course, both John and Simon express their firm view that the identities can be confirmed, and I concur.

This done, they begin to zip up the white bags—like thin sleeping bags—in which the soldiers rest. On impulse, I stop them. ‘I’d like to say goodbye, if I may,’ I say.

‘Of course, sir.’ Both step back.

I reach to a nearby shelf and extract a blue surgical glove from a box, pulling it onto my right hand. I take a slow breath and step close to each man, placing my hand on his shoulder in turn. The chill of their bodies reaches my heart. Looking down at each dead soldier, I say how sorry I am they have been claimed by war, thank them for their sacrifice and tell them they are on their way home. It feels perfectly natural to be speaking aloud to the dead. After a moment of contemplation, I say, ‘Goodbye Jacob.’ Then I pause and say, ‘Goodbye Darren.’

No-one else speaks. I look up at the two officers waiting quietly nearby. ‘Thank you, gentlemen,’ I say, and turn to include the other medical staff. ‘Thank you all, for your professionalism in this difficult duty, and for taking such good care of our fallen soldiers.’ I peel off the surgical glove, drop it in a bin and walk out to a waiting car. Behind me, the caskets are being sealed.

Soon afterwards, I stand in the blistering heat on the concrete apron of the airfield. A massive C-17 long-range transport aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force squats nearby, its rear ramp open. Every man and woman on the base not required for essential duty is also here. The simple ceremony to send the two fallen soldiers on their way home begins with the arrival of two black hearses. In a series of carefully executed drills, two bearer parties remove the caskets from the vehicles and lift them to their shoulders. The task force chaplain delivers a short address, then the pallbearers step off towards the rear of the C-17. I follow with the other official mourners to the tune of ‘Amazing Grace’ played on the bagpipes. With the two flag-draped caskets safely in the belly of the enormous aircraft, the Ode is recited. We all respond, ‘We will remember them,’ and, ‘Lest we forget.’

With a whine of hydraulics the vast rear ramp is closed. Standing close beside the hinge of the ramp, I keep my eyes on the two caskets until the mechanism clamps shut, blocking my view.

When we have fallen out and the crowd is making its way back towards the main part of the base, I avoid the people nearby, who are speaking quietly among themselves. I don’t feel like talking.

Five minutes later I step back into my office, feeling drained and miserable. My secure telephone is ringing. It is the commanding officer of the Special Forces task group, calling from Tarin Kot. One of his patrols, which was going after a high-value target on a mission I had recently approved, is engaged in a fierce firefight. One of the Afghan security forces personnel with them has sustained a gunshot wound to the leg; one of his men has been shot through the shoulder. Both wounds are serious. The evacuation helicopter is on the way but there might be a problem securing the landing point.

The war rolls on.

29

WHO DARES WINS, WITHOUT WARNING

Throughout the afternoon of 11 June I receive constant updates on the fierce battle involving our Special Forces. In addition to supporting our regular troops in Uruzgan, the Special Forces often hunt key Taliban targets in neighbouring Kandahar province to disrupt the infiltration of enemy commanders and fighters. A major operation is now underway in a remote area of Kandahar, the Shah Wali Kot district. The commander of the Special Forces, Lieutenant Colonel P—who, like all SAS soldiers and commandos, cannot be named—keeps me informed.

The firefight now underway is the decisive phase of a five-day operation I'd been briefed on earlier and endorsed. It is an offensive involving around 120 Special Forces soldiers that is designed to kill or capture Taliban commanders coordinating the flow of IED components and fighters from safe havens, such as Pakistan, into Uruzgan. It is inherently risky but has been meticulously planned. Intelligence indicated that key insurgent leaders and their fighters were active in the remote and inaccessible valleys of Shah Wali Kot in the northeast of Kandahar province. The Australian troops had been waiting for all the pieces to fall into place before launching their assault.

The opening phase began yesterday when a large group of commandos, who make up around two-thirds of the Special Operations Task Group, were

inserted by Chinook helicopters into the inhospitable Shinazef Valley, a Taliban-controlled area. Soon after they hit the ground, the commandos found themselves in a series of sharp fights among rocky ridges, inflicting numerous casualties on insurgents, who fought back hard. Sporadic fighting continued through the afternoon and night.

Today, as I farewell the two dead engineers, new intelligence reveals that the key targets, high-value Taliban leaders, are gathering in another valley just to the west of the commandos, near a village called Tizak. A large force of insurgent fighters is also being assembled. They appear to be preparing to counter-attack the commandos. Lieutenant Colonel P seizes the opportunity; he launches the SAS troopers he has held in reserve at Tarin Kot.

A Black Hawk helicopter drops a fire support group onto a bare ridge overlooking the village, while two other choppers make a fast approach to a landing area just south of Tizak. A fourth helicopter containing a patrol of six SAS soldiers swings to the north, where the troopers will provide aerial fire support and be ready to reinforce the assault if needed. The patrol is under the command of a muscular ex-Brit, Sergeant P.

Also on board is Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, a tall, powerfully built soldier. He’s known to one and all as RS. Along with an SAS sniper, RS is sitting in the open doorway of the helicopter, feet dangling, weapon ready. As they circle over the valley, they immediately attract enemy fire from a high peak. A rocket-propelled grenade streaks past the Black Hawk, passing right under RS’s boots, while machine-gun bullets smack into the cockpit and belly of the aircraft. RS and others return fire as the American pilot manoeuvres the helicopter sideways towards the peak. They kill the Taliban shooters, then land briefly to retrieve the enemy weapons.

Meanwhile, the assault force is leaping from helicopters. They run into a storm of bullets. Five Afghan special police officers are accompanying the

raid. One is shot in the leg. RPGs burst among the assault force. Apache gunships make strafing runs, cannons blazing, but the assault force is pinned down. RS and the others on board his helicopter are ordered to land in the assault area, and as they touch down they draw fire from multiple directions. Briefly shielded by raised dust, the men tumble out and find cover, but RS stays on his feet to wave off the helicopter. Bullets are kicking up dirt all around him as the helicopter staggers back into the air, riddled by enemy fire. The courageous crew draws more fire as it pulls away—RS dashes for cover behind a small rock, bullets chasing him.

While Sergeant P calls in more Apache gunships to hit machine guns on the high ground, RS coordinates another helicopter to extract the wounded Afghan police officer. A creek separates the patrol from the other Australians. As the assault force moves to marry up with them, an SAS soldier is hit, the bullet ripping through his shoulder. In another display of bravery, an aero-medical evacuation helicopter charges in to land, bullets tearing through it. Both casualties are bundled on board and the helicopter departs through a welter of fire.

In the desperate minutes that follow, RS and the other men fight their way forward on their elbows. They are barely able to raise themselves above the level of the surrounding rocks as enemy fire from three machine guns sweeps the ground and bullets whiz just centimetres above their heads. The main assault force is pinned down by intense fire, despite more Apache cannon runs. Sergeant P orders a flanking move and the six men bolt across the creek into a fig orchard, where they kill an insurgent who pops up among the trees. RS, as second-in-command of the patrol, has two troopers with him: D and J. The other two are advancing with Sergeant P when this group comes under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from a mud-walled compound 80 metres away.

What happens next is described in a document that I will write several weeks later, drawing on a draft citation from Lieutenant Colonel P, and statements from SAS troopers and the officer on the ground that day, Captain C. It recommends that Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith should receive Australia's highest award for valour, the Victoria Cross.

RS and his team fight their way towards the compound through heavy fire. They leapfrog, with two men providing covering fire while the third lunges forward a couple of metres. By the time they are 40 metres away, the fire from the compound has become intense. RS and his mates are using small mounds of dirt for cover; these dot the orchard but are so low—just 30 or so centimetres high—that Ben is forced to lie on his back because of his chest webbing, firing his rifle upside down. They have identified three PKM machine guns and several AK-47 gunners behind the wall.

Despite the withering fusillade, RS's patrol manages to get to within 20 metres of the machine guns, crawling on their bellies, aided by supporting fire from the other Australians. RS notices a small structure off to one side that must be cleared; any insurgent inside will be able to fire at them from the flank. Trooper J rears up on one knee, spraying the top of the wall with bullets as RS dashes towards the outbuilding. An insurgent inside is aiming a rocket-propelled grenade launcher from a window just as Ben reaches the building—RS fires instinctively, killing him, then clears the interior.

Now aware of Ben's location close by, the other insurgents begin firing at the outbuilding. Despite this, he yells at the nearest SAS soldiers for supporting fire. Trooper J again kneels in full view of the enemy, firing rapidly as RS zigzags through the trees. Dodging bullets, he hurls a grenade then scurries back to the dilapidated building. There is no reduction in the weight of enemy fire; instead, it reaches a new crescendo. The noise of battle is insane.

Sergeant P has also worked his way forward a little and throws another grenade—one of the machine guns falls silent, but its loss only slightly lessens the enemy onslaught. Bullets are thumping into the wall beside RS and he can see that the earth mounds in front of D and J are being eaten away by concentrated machine-gun and rifle fire. They are only seconds from death. Ben Roberts-Smith knows he must act.

He steps out, ignoring the hail of bullets, and runs straight at the nearest machine gun, 20 metres away near a break in the mud wall.

The insurgents see him coming. Two AK-47 shooters beside the machine-gunner turn to flee. The insurgent on the PKM swings his weapon onto the big Australian but, either through panic or poor training, sprays his bullets wide. At the moment the barrel is aimed at him, Ben drops to one knee and snaps off two shots, right into the insurgent's head. The man falls, dead before he hits the ground. The other machine gun is still firing. RS scuttle-runs 5 metres more along the wall and kills that PKM gunner as well. Ben's two mates, D and J, dash to the wall to join him.

RS leads his half-patrol to clear the buildings behind the wall, engaging in deadly close-quarter battle with insurgents inside. Sergeant P and the rest of the patrol join them after a running fight of their own. The rest of the assault force also close up, and the men pass around ammunition—RS has only two magazines left. Already, twenty-two insurgents have been killed. The whole force commences a grinding fight that will last several hours through the village and surrounding vegetation.

The battle is brutal; in the face of more machine-gun and AK-47 fire, the Australians advance, killing insurgent after insurgent while narrowly escaping death themselves. RS and J are again in the thick of it, despatching a fleeing machine-gun team and killing another insurgent at point-blank range in a bush-covered 'spider hole' from where he is directing enemy fire. In the closing minutes of the battle, an insurgent eludes RS and pops up

right behind him, firing a burst that snaps past, centimetres away, but miraculously misses. The SAS man following RS kills the insurgent a second later.

Late in the day I call my commander, Lieutenant General Evans, back in Australia. ‘Something very special has just happened,’ I say. The commandos are still in contact with enemy forces to the east of Tizak, and it is thirteen hours before the exhausted SAS force clears completely through the village and the valley to its north. By then more than seventy insurgents lie dead in Tizak, with at least two dozen more killed by the commandos and close air support. Almost a hundred enemy combatants dead! It has been an extraordinary victory by a vastly outnumbered force—the most significant battle involving only Australian troops since Vietnam. It is a major blow to the insurgency—ten of those killed are important Taliban commanders; a high-ranking insurgent who escapes with serious wounds will later die of his injuries.

The day after we’ve farewelled Snowy and Smithy, I head back to Afghanistan. I want to see their mates at Patrol Base Wali and debrief the Special Forces commander and his troops.

When I arrive at the Special Forces compound there is a quiet sense of accomplishment, although many of the men are still weary from the battle. The blow-by-blow briefing I receive on the actions in and around Tizak stiffens the hairs on the back of my neck. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel P, is in little doubt that the extraordinary charge by Ben Roberts-Smith deserves our highest award for valour. I need no convincing.

I pull up a seat in the dining hall next to Ben Roberts-Smith and his patrol commander, Sergeant P, who are talking quietly. They greet me with a friendly, ‘G’day, boss.’ I say that I’ve heard they had a bit of excitement at Tizak.

‘For some reason the locals didn’t seem too pleased to see us,’ says Sergeant P with a wry smile.

‘From what I’ve heard,’ I say, ‘you’re both lunatics, but I’m very proud of you. Bloody well done.’ I shake their hands.

RS smiles a little self-consciously. ‘Thanks, boss,’ is all he says. For his role, Sergeant P will later receive the Star of Gallantry, second only to the Victoria Cross bestowed on Ben Roberts-Smith.

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Elsewhere in the Tarin Kot base it’s business as usual. The emotional events of the preceding days have been put aside but not forgotten by the MTF1 team. When my party and I land at Patrol Base Wali, a patrol is already outside the wire. I spend some time in the command post, listening to the reports from the patrol hissing over the radio. The soldiers prowling through the fields and ditches in the valley below are enduring 50-degree heat and carrying 50 kilograms of armour, equipment, ammunition, water and weapons. They know they could be shot or bombed at any moment.

I discuss the tactical picture with the officer in command, Major Jason Groat, who was standing in this command post when he heard the explosion that killed two of his men. As in other parts of Uruzgan, the security situation depends on where you are, but the Mirabad Valley is a dangerous place throughout. Proximity to this base isn’t a guarantee of safety; only a couple of weeks ago an IED exploded just 200 metres from the front gate, wounding some Afghan soldiers.

I spend time walking around the base, talking to soldiers wherever I find them. Some are manning the observation towers or performing other tasks, but most of the Diggers are off duty, dressed in T-shirts, resting before the next patrol. The deaths of Jacob Moerland and Darren Smith are

discussed with great sadness, but there is a grim resolve here: they are determined to get on with the job, to do something worthwhile in the green zone that might so easily be the scene of their own deaths. One bloke says to me, ‘We gotta keep goin’, hey sir, otherwise Snowy and Smithy died for nothin’.’ He’s not trying to impress me: this is what he believes.

One of the soldiers I spend a bit longer with is the combat medic who tried to save Darren Smith, Lance Corporal Mark Hughes-Brown, known as HB. Not long into our conversation it is clear he isn’t travelling well. He is full of remorse and self-doubt, questioning his skills and torturing himself with thoughts about what he might have done differently. His eyes are downcast, he’s hurting badly and he blames himself.

I talk quietly to him and tell him he’s got it completely wrong. He did everything and more that we could have asked of him. I tell him he followed his procedures faultlessly, focusing his attention on the man who needed him. I remind him how he kept working on Smithy, even as the aero-medical evacuation helicopter landed. I say I’ve spoken to the doctor at the hospital, who said there was nothing anyone could have done to save Darren. ‘If Smithy had been on the table of an operating theatre in a major hospital back home, he still wouldn’t have made it.’ I lean forward and nudge his leg, to make him look up.

‘HB, you fought for Darren’s life in the dirt in the arse-end of Afghanistan, with only what you had in your med kit.’ He says nothing.

‘You did a fantastic job, mate. When Darren died it was with you right there beside him. Your hands are the last thing he felt. I’m very proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself.’

The young medic looks at me for a while and says, ‘Sure, sir.’ He isn’t buying any of it. As I leave, I shake his hand and squeeze his shoulder. The young corporal stares back at me. The look in his eyes is heartbreaking.

A while later Major Groat gathers the men and I talk to them as a group. I tell them their two fallen mates got a great send-off, and that they'll be home with their families very soon. I don't dwell on the loss; they don't need me to stir those bitter dregs.

I decide it's important to show my confidence in these blokes, especially the engineers. That afternoon I join a patrol, not a long or particularly dangerous one, across the river to a vehicle checkpoint that has been established to control traffic on the road to Tarin Kot. Our patrol passes the crater left by the IED not far from the front gate. The checkpoint is adjacent to an abandoned *quala*, one of the high mud-walled compounds that dot Afghanistan. The Diggers at the outpost are mentoring the Afghan soldiers running the checkpoint. The living conditions are very basic: they have only what they carried in on their backs. The walls of the *quala* are crawling with bugs, and the soldiers are speckled with bites. It is hot, dirty and very tedious work, but we share a laugh or two. I notice some of the soldiers have written 'Snowy' or 'Smithy' on their shoulder patches.

An hour or so later our patrol departs, leaving behind some water and batteries for the radio. Back at Patrol Base Wali, as I am unloading my rifle before going through the gate, one of the soldiers beside me says quietly, 'Thanks for coming out to see us, sir.'

'No worries, mate,' I reply, and follow him inside. I'm drenched in sweat, my boots are full of water and my back aches, but for the first time in days I don't feel useless.

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Less than two weeks after the deaths of the two engineers, I fly to Australia to restart my delayed leave. This time I go home, to the Puckapunyal army base in central Victoria. Jane picks me up from Melbourne airport after the

long flight; that night I sleep in my own bed, a wonderful feeling. But my troubled mind ruins things. I startle Jane awake with a shout, terrified by a nightmare. Old memories have been embellished by recent events.

Afterwards, I lie on my back staring at the ceiling. ‘Why can’t these bloody dreams just piss off?’ I ask the darkness. I am angry with myself for spoiling our first night back together. Jane has no answer; she just holds my hand.

The next morning we drive into the town not far from the base for coffee. It is chilly but the sun is out so we sit in the garden, waiting for our drinks. My mobile phone rings. It’s my deputy commander, Commodore Roger Boyce. He is an extremely able and amiable navy officer and we’ve become good friends.

‘Boss, I’ve got some bad news. There’s been a helicopter crash.’

Dread rises in my chest. One of the contingencies I have made my headquarters staff rehearse on several occasions is a crash involving a helicopter with troops aboard. I considered it the worst scenario we might face.

‘How many?’

He pauses and says, ‘Three dead, seven wounded, all badly.’

Jane is looking at me. My face betrays me because I see the colour drain from hers.

It is Monday, 21 June. At six o’clock that evening, I am on a plane at Melbourne airport, again bound for the Middle East. Getting my bag ready was easy: I hadn’t unpacked.

The next day I am back at Tarin Kot, jetlagged almost to the point of stupor, in the Australian Special Forces compound. The feeling of achievement that followed the battle at Tizak is gone. The commandos are grim and sorrowful. Once again I am talked through every aspect of what happened, but this time the briefing builds to a tragedy.

At 0339 hours on 21 June, in inky blackness, a force of Australian commandos had again been riding Black Hawk helicopters into battle, in the final phase of the operation in Shah Wali Kot. The four helicopters were packed with heavily armed men. The pilots flew using night vision goggles, aiming to arrive at the objective at a precise time. The flight of Black Hawks swung onto the final heading for the assault. Sitting close to the open door of one of the helicopters, a commando watching the shadowy desert flitting past noticed how close the ground was but he was not alarmed: low-level flying was routine. A moment later the helicopter, with fifteen men on board, smashed into the hard Afghan desert at high speed, rolling, coming apart and catching fire.

The helicopters accompanying the crashed Black Hawk immediately abandoned the assault, swinging back to land close to the crash site; the men running towards the wreckage were confronted by an appalling scene. Part of the helicopter was on fire and wounded men were yelling to be freed before the flames reached them. Commandos from the other helicopters risked their lives to save the trapped men. The bodies of other dead and wounded soldiers were spread around the shattered airframe. Men began working on the wounded. One of the badly injured commandos was found dragging himself towards his terribly wounded mate lying in the dirt nearby.

The crash killed Private Scott Palmer and Private Timothy Aplin outright. Private Benjamin Chuck was grievously wounded. Despite unrelenting efforts by his mates and others to save him, he was pronounced dead soon after he arrived at the main surgical hospital in Kandahar. Scott Palmer and Ben Chuck were both twenty-seven, and both were on their third combat tour in Afghanistan. Tim Aplin was the old man of the team at thirty-eight, having risen to sergeant before passing commando selection and relinquishing his rank to serve in the Special Forces. This was his

second stint in Afghanistan; like Scotty Palmer, he was also a veteran of East Timor and Iraq. One of the American aircrew was also killed in the crash: Sergeant Brandon Silk, a fresh-faced 25-year-old. The other helicopter crewmen and an Afghan interpreter suffered serious injuries.

Thirty-six hours after the crash, in the headquarters of the Special Operations Task Group, I watch infrared video taken from above the crash site on the night of the accident, and view photographs of the wreckage taken the following morning. The desert is scarred from the impact. The disintegrating rotor blades have taken bites from the earth as the helicopter pitched end-over-end. The earth around the gutted hulk is blackened, while the ground is littered with pieces of aluminium, shattered Perspex, broken wheels, sections of the blades, and a hundred other unrecognisable bits of helicopter.

The wounded survivors have been stabilised and are in the process of being flown to the American military hospital at Landstuhl in Germany. Their bodies have been brutally battered. Two of them are critical, another is very seriously ill and the others have variously suffered spinal and head injuries, broken bones, bruised organs, burns and lacerations. Those with the worst injuries have had emergency surgery to keep them alive.

Back in Australia, the families of the men killed in the crash have already been told the dreadful news. Their lives are now forever scarred, their futures diminished by the loss of a son, a husband, a father, a brother or a partner. Each of the fallen commandos also had a network of acquaintances who will also soon hear that someone they liked, respected or cherished is gone: friends, former schoolmates, members of sporting teams, fellow soldiers. The ripples of the awful news will spread far and wide. It is the deadliest single incident in Australia’s nine-year Afghanistan campaign. In two weeks five men have been killed while serving under my command.

On the morning of Thursday, 24 June, the Special Operations Task Group farewells their dead. Almost 200 soldiers stand around the three flag-draped coffins. The dark green berets of the commandos and sandy SAS berets are everywhere, outnumbering the few outsiders who, like me, wear slouch hats. Also in the crowd are Americans from Task Force ‘No Mercy’, the combat helicopter force that supports the Australians in Uruzgan. They are here out of respect for the fallen commandos and are also mourning their own soldier killed in the crash.

I speak to the group, praising the courage of the dead and the living, but it is the short eulogies from the mates of Scott, Ben and Tim that hit home. Even among these hard men, conditioned to combat and sacrifice, emotion catches in their voices. Lieutenant Colonel P, the commanding officer, closes the service by echoing the mottos on the badges of the berets of the SAS troopers and commandos: Who Dares Wins and *Foras Admonitio*—the Latin for ‘Without Warning’.

Outside the compound another multinational throng lines the dusty road leading to the airfield, where a C-130 Hercules awaits its cargo. The slow procession draws up at the rear of the aircraft and the bearer parties carry the three caskets into the hold, which in the blazing sunlight looks like a great dark cave. As the officers and soldiers gathered at the rear of the Hercules salute in unison, three Apache gunships sweep overhead, one for each of the fallen commandos. A short time later I am again on the flight deck of an aircraft climbing up and away from the dust and heat of Tarin Kot, the custodian of dead soldiers on the first leg of their journey home.

That night, back at my main base in the desert of the UAE, I set my alarm for 1.30 in the morning, when I will rise, dress and walk to the darkened airfield to join other Australians in helping our Canadian colleagues farewell one of their own soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

The next day I lead a memorial service for Scott, Ben and Tim prior to our own repatriation ceremony at the airfield. As I address the crowd of service men and women, I stand flanked by two objects of reverence. On my left is a gleaming black marble monument to Australians killed in the Middle East, a new addition I'd ordered to be constructed. On my right is a young pine tree, less than a metre tall, grown from a seed taken from a tree at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—the Lone Pine tree, which itself sprang from seed collected on the ridge at Gallipoli, where Australian soldiers won a bloody battle against the Turks in August 1915.

Later, in the cool and spotlessly clean space of the mortuary facility, I again join medical and military police specialists as they check the identities of the three commandos. As we begin, I look across the pale figures lying side by side, their wounds brutal in the harsh light, and know that this is yet another image I will carry to my grave. When I'm satisfied that the men have been properly identified, I rest my hand on each body in turn and bid them goodbye.

The Canadians return the previous night's act of shared sadness as they join the Australian contingent gathered at the airfield to send our dead countrymen home. It is 53 degrees and the sun is beating down like a blacksmith's hammer. The three caskets are carried through the honour guard leading to the ramp of a waiting transport aircraft. Once again, I salute and murmur a hoarse 'Lest we forget' as the ramp is sealed for the flight to Australia.

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Two days later I am in Germany, accompanied by my regimental sergeant major, Don Spinks. Don and I are here to check on the seven wounded survivors of the helicopter crash. We are in one of the houses provided free

for the families of military personnel undergoing treatment in the vast US-run medical centre. The Australian Defence organisation has flown out family members, and we are about to meet some of them before going to the hospital.

I introduce myself to the families, then we talk for a while, each one providing me with an update on their man. The news is encouraging in some cases, but there is clear concern on the faces of most of the soldiers' loved ones. Coming slightly late to the gathering are the mother and partner of one of the men, a signaller named Gary Wilson. His mother is Margaret and his fiancée is Renee. When Renee enters the lounge area, she takes one look at me in my camouflage uniform and her resolve crumbles. I take her in my arms while she weeps with anxiety and fear: Gary is gravely ill. The family of one of the other critically injured men, a commando sergeant whom I must refer to as Sergeant G, is already at the hospital, where they are keeping a bedside vigil.

When Don and I arrive at the critical care unit, Sergeant G is the first of the wounded we visit. We introduce ourselves to his wife, Katrina, and his father. Katrina's three teenage children are waiting for news back in Australia.

Katrina and Sergeant G's father stand beside the bed where G lies semi-naked, tubes and monitoring cables running from his body to a phalanx of machines. He has had major surgery and has not regained consciousness since the crash. Last time I saw him he was grinning and full of life. His lean body, broken and torn, now looks very vulnerable.

I am pierced by concern and dread: what if he doesn't make it? I stand close to his wife, gently asking questions. Katrina answers with a firm voice and a good understanding of her husband's many injuries; she has already learnt the lexicon of the doctors and nurses. Then we stand together, not speaking, just watching the man in the bed before us.

A sob escapes her, and I put my arm around her shoulders. All I can say is, ‘Ssh, he’ll be okay, he’ll be okay.’ Briefly, Katrina leans against me then composes herself. She wipes her eyes and again takes her unconscious husband’s hand. In the months ahead I will come to recognise her as a remarkably strong and courageous woman, almost as indomitable as her extraordinary husband.

Elsewhere in the hospital we find the less seriously injured commandos in various states of pain, ranging from bad to awful. Don and I talk to the men and meet more families and partners, all determined to provide support in whatever way they can.

The wounded men tell me their recollections of the crash. Most chilling are the descriptions of the moments immediately after the crash, when everything had stopped thrashing and spinning and there was a sort of silence until the moans and the crackle of flames could be heard in the darkness. This was when they began calling each other’s names, accounting for those on board; from some there was no answer.

It’s apparent that signaller Gary Wilson is in a bad way the moment we enter his room. His fiancée Renee has regained her composure and is hovering close beside him, checking the monitors, alert for any changes. Gary’s mother Margaret stands back, watching her son intently. Gary has suffered multiple injuries, but the most serious is head trauma. His brain has been stunned by the shocking impact and he lies in a coma, his body and limbs occasionally shaking as confused messages pulse through his nervous system. His face is battered and his head partly shaved from recent surgery.

Renee gives me a slightly embarrassed smile and says, ‘I’ve got it together again now,’ before taking Gary’s hand to help steady another palsied shudder. I take his other hand. When the shaking eases she talks to him, telling him that the general in command of all the Australians in Afghanistan has come to see him. I talk to him as well, saying that he’s in

safe hands, that Renee and his mum are helping to look after him, but that he needs to keep fighting. I tell him I share his passion for the Collingwood footy team and that I'll try to get him a signed jumper from the club—a month or so later, back in Australia, the club president Eddie McGuire makes it happen. Don Spinks talks to Gary too, saying how proud we are of him and his mates. For long periods, though, Renee and I just stand holding his hands.

Later, we return to Sergeant G's room. I again stand with his wife Katrina, my hand resting on his forearm. I can feel his pulse, fast and thin. 'Hang in there, mate,' I say.

It is a very long day.

The next morning Don Spinks and I make our rounds again. The two worst injured men are unchanged, as are most of the others. One commando who was also very badly hurt is a larger-than-life character, another commando sergeant. His legs and other parts of his body are a mess, but he has already gained a reputation among the medical staff as a bit of a wild boy. After some time spent in soldierly banter, he becomes more serious. Behind the earthy jokes I can see he is in a lot of pain. He is also mourning the loss of his three mates. Fighting men form deep bonds—it's a kind of love, but they'd never call it that—and the deaths of Tim, Scott and Ben have hit him hard. He is also fearful about his future. He knows his injuries are serious and he dreads not being able to return to duty as a commando. I try to reassure him but I am also uncertain of what lies ahead. When we part, the wisecracking tough guy is nowhere to be seen: instead I shake the hand of a pain-racked, grieving man with tears in his eyes. 'Thanks for coming, boss,' he croaks. My throat tightens.

Late that day, I catch a flight home to Australia to restart my leave. Dog-tired and emotionally spent, throughout the long flight I find myself reliving the last few days, seeing the pale bodies of the dead, the pain of the

living, the struggle of the men hovering between life and death, and the fear in the eyes of their parents and partners. When I eventually step off the plane and stand in the arrivals area hugging Jane once again, the tears that I’ve been holding inside come in a flood.

A week later my deputy calls again. Another soldier has been killed.

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SUMMER'S DEADLY HARVEST

I am sitting on the edge of our bed in our home in central Victoria, the travel bag at my feet already filled and zipped closed. In the early hours of this morning, while it was still Friday, 9 July in Afghanistan, my deputy, Commodore Roger Boyce, had again broken bad news. A press conference has already been called to inform the Australian public that Private Nathan Bewes has been killed by an improvised explosive device.

I have to get back. My place is in Afghanistan, to stand alongside the mates of the fallen and to be there for the start of Private Bewes's journey home. A taxi is on its way, a flight from Melbourne has been booked, and someone will pick me up at Dubai airport. From there a military aircraft is on standby to take me to Tarin Kot. All that's left to do is let my boss know that I am on the way back.

I call the joint operations commander, Lieutenant General Evans. 'Sir, it's John,' I say. 'I've heard the bad news from Afghanistan. I've got a flight arranged and I'm about to head to the airport.'

'John, I don't want you to go back to Afghanistan,' says General Evans.

I'm stunned. 'Sir, did you say don't go back?'

'That's right,' he replies. 'You've put someone else in charge and you need to let him get on with it.' Before I can respond, he adds, 'You've had to go back twice before, without any proper time off. I want you to finish your leave.'

‘Sir, I appreciate your concern but I’m fine,’ I say. ‘I’ve had a full week of leave and I’ve only got a couple of days left anyway. The flight is booked, I’m ready to go.’

‘I know that, but I want you to cancel those arrangements and enjoy the rest of your leave,’ he replies. ‘Let Roger Boyce take care of things. He’s the acting commander.’

‘Sir, I trust Roger without reservation. That’s not the point. He is filling in as commander, but *I’m* the commander and the people there are *my* responsibility. I feel very strongly that I should be there when one of them has been killed. It’s a personal commitment and I intend to keep it,’ I finish, becoming annoyed.

‘No, you won’t keep it, not this time,’ Mark Evans says evenly. ‘I’ve made my decision, and the Chief of the Defence Force agrees with me. You need to have a proper rest to get you through to January.’

I am shocked. ‘Sir, this is wrong. I’m ready to go. I don’t need more rest. My place is there. Please reconsider,’ I plead.

‘I’ve already thought it through, John. You’re not going back,’ he says.

I know an order when I hear it. The discussion is over.

I shake my head in frustrated silence. ‘I’ll do what you say, sir,’ I finally manage to say. ‘But I don’t agree.’

‘I understand that. We’ll talk again after your leave is finished and when you are back over there, John,’ says the general, and he hangs up. I know he believes he’s doing the right thing; it’s typical of Mark Evans’s caring nature. But at that moment I am bitterly disappointed and very angry.

I spend the last few days of my leave in a state of suppressed fury. Every media item on the death of Private Bewes is a slap in the face. I feel excluded and impotent. Jane encourages me to accept the situation and try to enjoy the days left to us. Intellectually, I know she is right; emotionally, it’s a different story. I watch the clock, stare at the calendar and leave my

bag packed. I'm being a pain in the arse; I can't help it. I know nothing more of the incident than the scant information released by the muted Defence public affairs machinery. Then a friend makes a surreptitious phone call to tell me what happened.

I learn that on the morning of 9 July, a group of Afghan National Army soldiers decided to conduct an unplanned resupply run, without telling their Australian mentors. Not long after leaving the isolated combat outpost (COP) called Mashal in the northern Baluchi Valley—which they share with the Australians—the Afghans came under attack. The Diggers in COP Mashal were puzzled to hear multiple AK-47s further up the valley. The Afghans still in the base confessed that some of their colleagues had slipped out. The Australian patrol base commander arranged for Coalition aircraft to make several low-level runs, without firing, over the area. This show of force encouraged the insurgents to scuttle and the ANA truants straggled back into the relative security of the outpost.

The scale and intensity of the insurgent ambush was surprising. The Australian officer in command decided to organise a hasty patrol to find out what was going on. Private Nathan Bewes—Nate or 'Bewesy' to his mates—immediately volunteered. He was one of the more experienced soldiers at the small base, despite his rank and age, twenty-three. A lad from Murwillumbah, on the New South Wales north coast, he was a former army cadet who had always wanted to join the real army. He had served in East Timor and was on his second tour in Afghanistan. Just the day before, he was involved in an intense fight and was pinned down by heavy fire from Taliban insurgents, with dozens of bullets striking all around him. He was finally able to withdraw under covering fire from Lance Corporal Brendan Clarke—who would earn the Medal for Gallantry for his courage in this and another battle.

A sixteen-man patrol headed out, searched the area and identified a suspicious individual, whom they detained. The patrol began its journey back to COP Mashal with Bewesy as the lead scout. This job is entrusted to the best soldiers. It demands skill, courage and a bit of luck; he is the man out in front, taking the most risk.

As Nate crossed a track running parallel to an aqueduct, his luck ran out. An IED detonated directly beneath him, killing him instantly.

The tale told, I sit holding the telephone handpiece for long moments, visualising the events and the brutal conclusion. Finally, I say to my informant, ‘At least it was quick.’

Four days after Nate Bewes’s death, I say goodbye to Jane with mixed feelings: I am sad to be leaving but desperate to get back to the Middle East. She smiles softly, cries a little and sends me on my way again. I almost run down the gangway to the waiting plane.

I arrive in Dubai before dawn, and within an hour I am in my headquarters drilling my deputy, Roger Boyce, for every detail of the farewell ceremony in Tarin Kot where he had represented me. I can tell he found the experience deeply moving.

Roger starts to brief me on the details of today’s repatriation, when I stop him. ‘Roger,’ I say, ‘I think you should see this through. I’ll do the final confirmation of identity at the mortuary, but I want you to lead the ceremony at the airfield today. I’ll be there, but you’ll be out front.’

I receive a look of gratitude. ‘Thanks, boss,’ Roger says quietly. ‘I’d really like that.’

Shortly afterwards I stand beside Nate’s body in the morgue, a familiar, ghastly routine. The blast was powerful and he was right on top of it. He would have felt nothing. His suite of tattoos makes identification easy. One of them, on Bewesy’s upper right arm, is a large Australian flag. I place my hand on the flag as I say my farewell. ‘I’m sorry, Nathan. Goodbye, mate.’

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July slides into August and the pain of death recedes slightly, at least during the day; my nights are still regularly disrupted by nightmares. Memories from the morgue haunt me, but I am determined not to flinch from that duty. I take medication that is supposed to fend off the demons and help me sleep. It's more than a month since Nathan Bewes died. If we can just get through August without any more deaths, I think, we might be able to keep them all alive until winter snows arrive, marking the end of the fighting season.

It's a forlorn hope.

Trooper Jason Brown, twenty-nine, is a Sydney boy, a former pupil of Oakhill College in Castle Hill, a dedicated supporter of the South Sydney Rabbitohs and the son of a Vietnam veteran. He always wanted to join the army and achieved his goal in 2000 when he enlisted in the infantry, like his father. Jason served in an infantry battalion for a few years before undertaking commando training, earning the coveted green beret of the commandos in 2004. In 2007 he successfully completed the gruelling SAS selection course. He has three tours of East Timor under his belt; now he is on his first deployment to Afghanistan.

On Friday, 13 August, around 1830 hours, Jason Brown and other members of his troop are wrapping up an operation in northern Kandahar province. Jason's patrol is moving alongside a river to rendezvous with a helicopter. He is in the centre of the five-man patrol, moving along a slightly raised footpad. They are passing a patch of dense scrub when a machine gun opens fire from within the thick foliage. Several bullets hit Jason at almost point-blank range and he drops like a stone. Seconds after the initial burst, other insurgents open up and the SAS soldiers return fire.

Some of the Australians throw grenades, adding to the mad racket. The other half of the troop, still slightly north, rushes towards the contact.

In the clearing where Jason Brown now lies, bullets are ripping across the ground and slamming into trees and rocks. The two SAS men closest to him are pinned down by the intense fire but one of them, Sergeant D, gathers himself to make a dash to Jason. The ferocity of fire is such that his mate yells, ‘Don’t do it!’ but D launches himself forward in what seems a suicidal act. His fellow troopers see bullets striking all around him and then D too drops heavily, landing beside Jason. They think he’s dead. They can see bullets smashing into his backpack and equipment. But moments later D rears up, firing rapidly, then shouts, ‘One dead enemy!’ The volume of enemy fire lessens slightly. For this extraordinary act, Sergeant D will later receive the Star of Gallantry.

Sergeant D and another soldier drag Jason out of the direct line of fire and administer first aid; there are no vital signs so they begin CPR. Intense firing continues around them as the second patrol arrives and lays down covering fire. Eventually the troop is able to pull back slightly, supported by cannon runs from Apache attack helicopters. An aero-medical evacuation helicopter manages to make it in, despite thick dust and sporadic fire. Jason still has no vital signs. Two medics and other patrol members keep up CPR on Jason until the helicopter lifts off, but he is declared dead when he is stretchered into the trauma bay of the Kandahar military hospital a short time later.

A couple of days later, on Monday, 16 August, I join the Special Operations Task Group gathered in their Tarin Kot compound to farewell their fellow warrior. On Jason’s casket rests his hard-won sandy SAS beret with its winged-sword badge. When one of his best mates recounts Jason’s service history, he is choked with emotion; tears trickle down my face but I don’t care who sees. Beside me sits my deputy, Commodore Roger Boyce;

he’s here today because, by a quirk of fate, he is a friend of the Brown family, having once lived down the road from them. He is also taking it hard. The sense of loss among Jason’s mates is palpable; he will clearly be missed. A little while later, the C-130 Hercules with Jason’s casket in the rear, and me sitting miserably in the front, rises through the dusty haze surrounding Tarin Kot, a bright fan of flares marking its wake.

The next day I drive to the far end of our base, to the mortuary. We carefully make the formal, final identification; there can be no error. ‘Goodbye, Browny, you’ll be home soon,’ I say, my hand on his cold skin. He is the eighteenth Australian soldier to be killed in Afghanistan, the seventh to die under my command.

Three days later two more die.

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On the morning of 20 August 2010, a joint Afghan–Australian patrol steps out into the Baluchi Valley, north of Tarin Kot. The patrol is heading for the village of Khawaja Ahmad, searching for Taliban rocket launching sites. On one of the barren ridges above the rich green of the valley floor is an Australian infantry platoon, call sign India 36, supported by engineers and ASLAV armoured vehicles. They are members of Mentoring Team Charlie. Their job is to peer below, searching the dense vegetation, ready to provide fire support if the slowly advancing foot patrol below needs it. Engineers have checked the hilltop and soldiers rotate on watch. Those waiting to take their turn eat rations, drink brews of tea or coffee and rest.

Two of the soldiers are Privates Grant Kirby and Tomas Dale. Grant Kirby is a Queenslander and the father of two girls—at thirty-five he is considerably older than his mates in the platoon. He has spent time in East Timor and Iraq before starting this mission in Afghanistan. Tom Dale is

twenty-one. He was born in the United Kingdom but has been an Adelaide boy since his family migrated when he was a child. This is his first deployment.

Both men become restless and decide to stretch their muscles. An impromptu contest is proposed: who can do the most push-ups? Grant and Tom both drop into the ‘ready’ position—backs straights, arms extended—and begin. Down, up; down, up; down, up. Both are going well. They grin at each other, daring the other to quit first.

Despite thorough checks and the passage of several other vehicles and soldiers, an IED is lurking in the ground beneath them. It could have been there for days or months. There is a flash and a roar. The Bushmaster rocks on its suspension. For several moments there is confusion. At first the soldiers think it’s a rocket. When there are no more explosions, the men of call sign India 36 quickly take a roll call. A soldier who had been standing in the hatch of the Bushmaster is wounded in the face. Another, who had been ribbing Grant and Tom and who had turned to walk away, is hit by several pieces of shrapnel. The platoon commander, also nearby, is battered semiconscious. In the spot where Private Dale and Private Kirby had been, there is now a large smoking crater.

In the horrible minutes that follow, the men of India 36 discover the remains of their comrades, blown off the crest of the ridge by the force of the explosion. That Grant and Tom died instantly, without pain or fear, is gruesomely obvious. The last thing each would have seen must have been the grinning face of his friend.

The night before the farewell service, in the Apache hangar at Tarin Kot, Tom and Grant’s mates gather for a wake. I have authorised a couple of cans of beer per man and am privileged to be invited to this very private gathering, along with the man who took over as commanding officer of

MTF1 not long before the death of Nathan Bewes, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Jennings.

I talk quietly with a soldier who confides he found it impossible to help carry the remains of one of the dead men back to the top of the hill. He mercilessly berates himself for his ‘weakness’ and tells me, ‘I just couldn’t do it, sir, I just couldn’t.’ He describes images he’ll never forget. Our conversation is interrupted when one of the platoon members comes past with a bush hat, into which blokes are chucking handfuls of US dollars—the military system will provide for the families but the men want to send their own contribution. I drop some cash in and am repaid with a sincere, ‘Good on ya, boss.’

Later, with the two beers consumed, the mood lifts slightly. Tom and Grant have been toasted and farewelled. Someone produces a bowl of dried dog food, rations for some adopted mutt, and shouts, ‘General Cantwell will eat this dog food if enough money is thrown in the hat!’ No-one is more surprised than me. Someone drops in a fifty-dollar note. I take a big handful and crunch away, to whooping laughs and cheers. I hastily authorise a third beer—I desperately need something to wash down my bar snack.

There are no smiles the next morning at the formal send-off. Once again, flag-wrapped caskets rest on trestles beneath large photographs of the fallen. Tom and Grant’s mates huddle around the dais, arms around each other’s shoulders, as two young officers deliver the eulogies. The tributes are wonderful, amusing and deeply sad. Young Tom, we are told, was endlessly cheerful, a constant morale-booster. Grant Kirby, it is said, was the elder brother everyone wanted to have, and his whole life revolved around his two beautiful daughters, Isabella and Madeleine, aged ten and eight. Lieutenant Colonel Jennings delivers a powerful oration. He describes the incident and tells the grieving soldiers that Tom and Grant have fallen victim to the unpredictable, infuriating, merciless fortunes of

war. ‘Everything was done right, no actions were left undone,’ he says. ‘Your actions—before and after the event—are a shining example of devotion to duty and devotion to your mates.’ He exhorts them to continue the fight.

When I am called forward, I have no prepared speech. I look over the two coffins before me and voice what is in my heart.

‘As the commander of Joint Task Force 633, I stand here today somewhat of an outsider to the family that is Mentoring Task Force Number One. The events of the last few days are intensely personal to those who are part of the MTF1 family, members of that team, and mates of the fallen. Nonetheless, all of us, the rest of the joint task force who are in this fight with you, share your hurt, your pain, your sense of loss and anger.

‘These are dark days. This is a test. And the test isn’t finished. As your commanding officer has just said, the fight must continue. And Australian soldiers, being Australian soldiers, will do exactly that. Australian soldiers do not step back. Australian soldiers never flinch. Australian soldiers never forget their mates. Australian soldiers do not fight for lofty ideals of democracy or freedom. Australian soldiers, it has been said many times and with great truth, fight for their mates. For Tom and Grant, their fight for their mates is over. But they want you, they need you, and I need you, to keep fighting. Keep fighting for your mates. Keep fighting for yourselves. Get yourselves home to your families and loved ones … Lest we forget.’

It is an emotional speech, but emotion isn’t hard to come by. Just before the ceremony, I was informed that another soldier had been killed.

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Up until their withdrawal, Dutch and French troops had been responsible for the Deh Rawod district, 40 kilometres west of Tarin Kot. It is a large

triangle of fertile land. Running from the points of this triangle are three river valleys; the one to the east is the Tangi Valley. It is bandit country that has claimed Dutch and French lives. The road running through it towards Tarin Kot is completely off limits to Coalition road traffic, which is forced to divert far to the south. For some time the Tangi Valley villagers, and the Taliban, have been left to their own devices.

With the Dutch and French departures, Australian soldiers move in. They are Mentoring Team Delta, based on D Company of the 6th Battalion, whose forebears had won acclaim in the desperate battle at Long Tan in South Vietnam. Along with other outposts in the Deh Rawod district, they occupy a small patrol base called Anar Juy at the western end of the Tangi Valley, along with ANA soldiers. The commander of the Afghan army unit based in Deh Rawod wants to expand his area of control eastwards, into the Tangi Valley. A 'fighting patrol'—the army description for a patrol that expects a battle—is conceived, with the mission to push east to a village called Derapet, then hold a *shura* with the village elders to discuss ways to improve security. On 24 August, a forty-man fighting patrol, comprising both Australian and Afghan soldiers, heads out from Patrol Base Anar Juy.

The operation is well planned and well supported. The initial moves are made some time before dawn, to seize locations to support further movement eastwards. ASLAV armoured reconnaissance vehicles, with their 25-millimetre cannons and high-definition optical systems, occupy higher ground, ready to observe and shoot. Also on the high ground are men with 84-millimetre anti-tank weapons, armed today with high-explosive warheads fitted with airburst fuses. Other fire support, including mortars, Apache helicopters and close-support jet aircraft, is on call if required. An Australian Scan Eagle surveillance drone will provide aerial observation of the battlefield.

As the patrol moves through the village of Derapet, the signs of an impending clash—the bad ‘atmospherics’—are plain: women can be seen leaving the area, children in tow. The men spread out, advancing cautiously, waiting for the first shots. Some distance to the rear of the forward troops, a section of around ten infantrymen follows, positioned to prevent enemy getting in behind the lead group and to reinforce it if necessary. Their radio call sign is Four Three Charlie. Among them is 28-year-old Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, the second in command. He is a skilled marksman, a veteran of East Timor and Iraq, greatly respected by his fellow soldiers, and only recently promoted to lance corporal. He is known to his mates as Crash.

When the shots come, the Taliban opening salvo is withering. The leading troops are caught on low ground, pinned down by heavy fire from multiple directions. The Diggers return fire at dozens of insurgents hiding in thick vegetation. The area is dissected by several aqueducts, adding to the confusion. Some of the soldiers, Australians and Afghans, rush to a low ridge on the right. Both parts of the patrol are receiving machine-gun bullets, rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Dust from the battle begins to envelop the area, making observation difficult. The ASLAV armoured vehicles start firing, slamming cannon rounds into enemy positions right in front of the infantry. The boom of airburst 84-millimetre high-explosive rounds echoes around the hills. From his post on a ridge overlooking the valley, the officer controlling the supporting fire is having trouble identifying targets through the rising dust. He decides—correctly—not to call in mortar or artillery fire for fear of hitting his own troops. Meanwhile, more Taliban fighters are seen moving into the area. An urgent call crackles over the radio to the section held in reserve: ‘Four Three Charlie! Get up here!’

Crash MacKinney and his mates dash towards the clamour of the firing, struggling over rough ground in searing heat. After running more than half a kilometre, the soldier carrying the section's MAG58 machine gun—which weighs 11 kilograms—starts to flag under the crushing load of the gun, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, his body armour and other equipment. Crash grabs the MAG58 from him, hands over his own weapon, and they continue together up a ridge being raked by heavy fire.

The pair drop onto their bellies to provide supporting fire, with Jared behind the machine gun. As he is about to shoot, a bullet strikes him in the left shoulder, passing through muscle, deflecting off bone and entering his chest, inflicting horrible damage. He collapses face down behind the machine gun. The soldier beside him immediately tries to help. Another soldier leaves cover, running across to Jared. The men drag him behind meagre protection, a low mound. Other soldiers see that the vital machine gun is unmanned; it is snatched up and brought into action.

With bullets slashing past them, soldiers trained in advanced first aid work on an unresponsive Jared. They keep it up while an aero-medical evacuation helicopter is summoned. Still ducking bullets, the men carry Jared to an open area on the edge of the battlefield, where a courageous American helicopter crew makes two attempts to land through enemy fire before they get in on the third try. Crash MacKinney is loaded into the helicopter, which lifts off through more bullets, heading for the Tarin Kot hospital only minutes away.

Jared is dead when the helicopter lands.

Back at Derapet, the fighting rages for a further three hours, during which the Australians and ANA soldiers mount and repel several counter-attacks. Apache helicopters make repeated gun-runs, while the 25-millimetre fire of the ASLAV armoured vehicles provides vital close support. Several acts of remarkable bravery occur. Two men, Sergeant Sean

Lanigan and Private Paul Langer, will later each receive the Medal for Gallantry; their platoon commander, Lieutenant James Fanning, will be awarded a Distinguished Service Medal; a fourth man, Private Shaun Parker, earns a Commendation for Gallantry.

When the Australians eventually depart, the battle of Derapet, as it becomes known, will have claimed more than thirty—perhaps as many as fifty—Taliban out of a disciplined enemy force numbering up to a hundred fighters. There are no further Australian or Afghan army casualties. When they are all back at their patrol base, the men of Mentoring Team Delta start packing up Crash's gear.

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The death of Jared MacKinney, on the same day that Tom Dale and Grant Kirby are farewelled, hits the men and women of MTF1 very hard. He was married, with a three-year-old daughter, Annabell; this is tough enough to bear, but adding to the pain everyone feels is the fact that his wife Beckie is only weeks away from giving birth to their son. It seems desperately, horribly unfair.

While we grieve, farmers across Uruzgan are preparing to take in their ripe crops of corn, wheat, almonds and opium. Soon it will be harvest, a time of celebration and optimism.

For the Australians fighting here, it has been a deadly summer and a bitter harvest.

31

LAST HURRAH

The closing months of 2010 pass without further deaths, although there are many near misses and wounds, both light and life-changing. I meet soldiers who've survived explosions, been patched up and gone back into the fight. I talk with men who have felt the cold breath of death as bullets passed through their webbing, or clipped their helmet, or lodged in their body armour. I shudder at how close many have come to disaster and oblivion. Our training, tactics and equipment are validated, but we are also incredibly lucky.

I spend a great deal of time imprisoned in my office, captive to the demands of Canberra. As much as possible I shield the unit commanders in Afghanistan from the deadening touch of Defence bureaucrats and political wrangling, but not always successfully. I tear my hair in frustration when I am second-guessed, undermined or contradicted by staff officers half a world away; sometimes I get actual help. I have a bit of a blue with my boss, a turf war; we patch it up and get on with it.

I keep trying to streamline my complicated organisation, eradicate duplication and slaughter sacred cows, of which there are several herds, unfenced. Sometimes I get what I want by explaining and cajoling; at other times I lose patience and just bulldoze through changes. Regrettably, some people aren't up to the job I need them to do; they go home to Australia. I stroke egos, kick backsides, have a few wins, concede a larger number of losses. I patch up disagreements, start new ones, make a few enemies and

find lifelong friends. I watch the progressive departure and replacement of every unit and individual within my command who was here when I took over in January. I am literally the Old Man.

I stand in hospital wards beside young men with gunshot or blast wounds. My regimental sergeant major, Don Spinks, and I return to the Landstuhl medical centre in Germany to visit a seriously wounded soldier who is recovering from major surgery before being shipped home. Lying in bed, regularly pressing the button on a device that delivers pain relief on demand, he tells me he is suffering horrible flashbacks of the moment he stepped on an IED. He has lost part of one leg and has a badly damaged hand; he is struggling to come to terms with his wounds. I talk with him for some time but know I haven't helped him. When I leave the ward I feel miserable.

I pin well-deserved medals on ADF personnel—my favourite task—and promote people in workshops, warehouses, airfield hangars and isolated Afghan valleys. I review and recommend medal nominations for exceptional service, leadership in battle or skin-tingling, balls-out, life-threatening courage under fire. Of the latter there are many. I savour signing the one with Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith's name on it—it's not every day you get to recommend someone for the Victoria Cross.

I travel to the far-flung corners of my command whenever I can. I marvel at the skill, inventiveness and endurance of sailors, soldiers and airmen scattered all over the Middle East. I share laughs and a few tears and shake a thousand hands. I visit every patrol base in Uruzgan several times, and go westwards to Helmand province, where Australian artillery soldiers are attached to British forces, the first place since Vietnam that our gunners have fired in anger. I pester senior Coalition officers in Kabul and Kandahar to get what we need to support our troops.

I shoot weapons of every kind and calibre, including captured enemy items. To help me better understand the battle against IEDs, I learn how to make them. I am humbled by the daily heroism of the combat engineers who search for and disable the devices that would kill and maim. I authorise the dropping of bombs from combat jet aircraft onto some of our own disabled and unrecoverable Bushmaster vehicles, wrecked by IEDs in Taliban-controlled areas.

I approve scores of media updates, make or release dozens of newsy videos, provide commentary on our challenges and progress, and look for every opportunity to tell the Australian people what our troops are doing, and how well they're doing it. Most of these messages sink without a trace in the Defence and parliamentary precincts of Canberra. I get more mileage from the story of sending home a long-lost and rediscovered explosive-detection dog, Sarbie, than from all of my other media engagements combined. In general, the work of our service men and women seems to be invisible in the Australian media. It's partly the fault of the press, but largely due to the draconian control of information by the Department of Defence Public Affairs Office and the Defence Minister's office.

I am routinely impressed by the men and women in my headquarters, from all three services, most of whom have been thrown into jobs they know nothing about and are expected to perform well from day one. It is a thankless task, far from the fighting, immersed in paperwork, emails and telephone calls. I constantly remind them they are making an important contribution. I try to make them laugh, even when I'm working them like slaves, and generally succeed. One of them, a delightful and hardworking air force officer named Cindy Chawner, provides me with one of the most valuable gifts I receive while in command. At a time when every week brings news of more deaths, and when my morale is flagging badly, Cindy pops her head into my office one evening and announces, 'Sir, I am a

woman and a mother, and I can tell you need a hug.' It is one of the best hugs I've ever had, and the most timely.

I regularly tour our detainee screening facility in Tarin Kot, where suspected insurgents are held for further processing. Sometimes we nab some very nasty individuals, but many are released soon after their capture with a few dollars and a new pair of sandals—they are impressionable youths or desperate farmers who become amateur insurgents for the five to ten dollars a day the Taliban offers them. I see the other face of the insurgency during a visit to the US-run detention facility in Parwan province, north of Kabul. In sharp contrast to the unforgivable excesses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq that scandalised the world in 2004, the Parwan detention facility is a model of careful, well-managed calm, with a focus on rehabilitation. But we'll never win some individuals over. I tour the wing where hard-core Taliban and sundry terrorists are housed. Their unadulterated hatred of us infidels is palpable, as is the faeces they hurl through the bars at their captors.

I eat variously wonderful and unspeakable Afghan food, always offered with great generosity by even the poorest villagers, and drink innumerable cups of *chai*. I form a strong affection for the hardy people we are trying to assist despite the murder in the hearts of some. I attend many *shuras*—meetings—with local strongmen, tribal chiefs, police officers, simple villagers, ANA commanders and anyone else who wants to talk. During one *shura* the headman quietly tells me that the watchful guys at the other end of the rug are Taliban fighters who have come along to size me up. As our patrol leaves, the outed Taliban drive a little way down the road in a dilapidated car to watch us walk by. We keep our weapons trained on them, they keep theirs out of sight—we part company with wary looks.

I admire the incremental improvements to the lives of the Uruzgan people achieved by the Provincial Reconstruction Team headed by Bernard

Philip, an energetic and chronically sunburnt Australian diplomat. His team is a mixture of Foreign Affairs people and field officers from AusAID. The PRT's success is measured in more kids attending school, improvements in basic health services, and some good agriculture and water projects.

These worthy achievements, sadly, are dwarfed by the scale of the problem. Most of the 300,000 people in Uruzgan live in poverty. Only 10 per cent of men can read and write, while 99 per cent of women are illiterate. Eighty per cent of children don't or can't attend school. Ninety per cent of schools are boys-only institutions. Nearly half of all brides are teenagers, and have no choice about whom they'll marry. At least 700 women die in childbirth each year. Twenty per cent of children don't make it to the age of five. Ten kids die every day in Uruzgan, mostly from preventable disease. I hear these figures time and again during briefings for visiting dignitaries—the repetition only increases the sense of impotency I feel. Our laudable national aid efforts are a minuscule drop in the ocean of misery and disadvantage in Uruzgan. When I discuss this with one of the AusAID workers, he shrugs and says, 'Something is better than nothing.'

I observe slow, patchy but steady progress by the Afghan National Army soldiers we are training and mentoring. I meet some excellent ANA commanders and a few utterly useless ones, a few hard-charging Afghan soldiers and a few who aren't worth the rations they consume. I form the view that the blood of the legendary Afghan warrior has thinned somewhat over the centuries, but when they are well led, particularly if Australians are directly in charge, the ANA soldiers are quite effective. Some Afghan officers and soldiers genuinely despise the Taliban and are happy to kill them; in others I suspect a lurking inclination to reach an accommodation with them and just go home. I forge a sincere friendship with one particularly impressive Afghan officer, Brigadier General Abdul Hamid, who is for a time the commander of the 4th Brigade until he is promoted to

command the Afghan forces right across southern Afghanistan. I hope to see him again, in happier times.

On several occasions I visit the big military hospital in Kandahar, where the most seriously wounded go, because of its advanced surgical capability. During some visits there are dreadfully injured men being worked on in the trauma bay: torn, disfigured and dismembered, still in combat fatigues and dusty boots, straight from the battlefield. I stand back from the table, watching the amazing work of the doctors and nurses—if the aero-medical evacuation helicopters can get the wounded here alive, they have a good chance of surviving, even if their wounds are catastrophic. For a while our oldest son Dave, an advanced medic, is assigned to the hospital, where he is routinely up to his elbows in blood. It's not a job I could do.

I host visits by various politicians including Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott. Both visits go well. The two are engaging, interested and speak well when addressing the troops. Defence Minister John Faulkner makes a very successful visit, impressing all he speaks to. His replacement, Defence Minister Stephen Smith, also visits, to somewhat less glowing reviews. The leader of the Greens, Bob Brown, threatens to visit Afghanistan but confines his interactions with the troops to strident calls for their withdrawal, from the moral high ground of Canberra.

I take part in more patrols, in vehicles and on foot. The Chief of the Defence Force, Angus Houston, has asked me not to participate in foot patrols, out of concern for my personal safety and the ruckus that would occur if I got killed or wounded. A request from a four-star officer is really an order, but it is one I cannot obey. I feel compelled to share a little of the risks and hardships of the men putting their lives on the line.

One day I take a helicopter east along the Mirabad Valley to Patrol Base Musazai. This small outpost was built to establish a permanent

security presence in this deeply hostile part of the valley. Pitched battles accompanied the building process, which I took as a good sign: the Taliban didn't want us there, which meant the commanding officer of MTF1 had picked the right spot. I intend to join a patrol comprising Australian and Afghan soldiers from Musazai into the green zone.

Don Spinks is joining me. Also coming will be my 'bodyguard', Warrant Officer Pete Saintsbury, who will shadow me throughout. I have come to rely heavily on Pete, and not just for his skill and cheerful outlook. In the closing months of my deployment, an old injury sustained almost twenty years ago—a crushed vertebrae in my neck, which happened when a large tree branch fell on top of my tank when I was a mere lieutenant—has begun to trouble me. The injury is constantly aggravated by wearing my helmet while being tossed about in helicopters and Bushmasters. The pain at the base of my neck is transmitted into my chest and left arm, and also induces splitting headaches.

Adding to this, the ankle I injured jumping into the sea off Somalia months ago has not healed; it is still heavily strapped and prone to rolling painfully if I miss my footing. I curse both injuries and have no patience for them. One of the pouches on Pete's body armour now carries packets of painkillers of differing potency, which he feeds me as required. I had finished my tour in Baghdad in 2006 in pain; it looks like it is going to be the same this time.

Before we set off, the corporal in charge of the patrol briefs us on our route and response if we are attacked. There is a sergeant with us on the patrol, but he is there to mentor the Afghan soldiers; today, the corporal is in command—he can give me orders too if he wishes. Fire support is arranged, in case we need it. We check our weapons and ammunition, ensure that we each have field dressings and tourniquets, then practise the formation we will use, spreading out into two columns of men across the

open area inside the patrol base. Other men from within the garrison take up positions to cover our departure as our patrol heads out through the gate. We expect the insurgents to have a go at us: the area where we are headed is a hotspot in a part of the valley known for its unrest.

At the front, combat engineers swing mine detectors rhythmically to and fro, scanning our path. We leave the hard-packed earth of the track outside the patrol base almost immediately, striking out through the fields. Our route now takes us onto the bare *dasht* running alongside the green zone to check a small village perched on a low ridge. As I walk up the rocky slope into the village, a man and several children squat, watching me intently. I raise a hand in greeting, but the stony stares continue. We descend back into the vegetated land closer to the river that is the source of life here, the Tiri Rud. Following a waist-high mud wall beside a field stripped of its crop, we see several men observing us from the far side. Some of the soldiers in front of me lift their rifles to their shoulders, using the magnified scopes mounted on top of the weapons to get a closer look at them. The men disappear into the trees.

In another field an old man and a small boy are loading a donkey with tied bundles of dry corn stalks. We pause while one of the Afghan soldiers speaks to them, asking questions about the local insurgents, while an Australian pats down the old man's clothing. The boy watches blankly. The donkey doesn't care; he ambles up to the next pile of stalks and stops, waiting to receive another load. Unlike others I have seen on previous patrols, these ANA soldiers are properly equipped and dressed, and seem alert and focused on the job. As we move off, one of them with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher over his shoulder passes close by me with a wink and a grin. I smile back and follow him. This is progress, I tell myself.

We walk near a long deep depression with a small creek running through it. The soldiers, who have patrolled this area on many occasions,

call it ‘IED Alley’—it is an obvious route towards the cluster of villages that is our destination, and previous patrols have encountered many explosive devices along its length. We avoid it, trailing along beside it in a well-spaced line. We all follow closely in the tracks of the engineers. Every patch of dirt, every lump of soil, every path and footpad, every mud wall, pile of rocks or stack of wheat husks, is a potential killer. This ragtag, poorly organised insurgent force has found the perfect weapon to tie up a huge international war machine, avoid our superiority in firepower, negate our advanced technology, and kill and main our soldiers, using homemade explosive fashioned from fertiliser, a few bits of wood or plastic, some wire and torch batteries. It’s a galling reality.

Passing some buildings along the edge of the creek, we stop at each blind corner, peering around, one man covering down the alley running off to one side or another as the next man strides quickly across. Pete and I work as a pair. I am walking past the doorway of one of the buildings when a young girl walks through it, apparently unaware of our presence. She stops abruptly, staring at me open-mouthed. I raise one hand to signify I mean no harm, at which she flinches and emits a squeak of fright. A woman jumps through the doorway and pushes the girl inside, whirling away to follow her. I feel guilty for frightening them.

We descend into another deep creek, wading waist-deep through the cold water before struggling up the muddy far bank. When we emerge from some thick scrub onto the south bank of the Tiri Rud, more men are watching us. They dart away, to reappear elsewhere. One of the Australian mentors, the sergeant accompanying the Afghan troops, says to me, ‘Trouble’s brewing.’

Other Afghan men are running along behind a wall across the river we are now following. Several cluster together, pointing in our direction. ‘I

think one's got a rifle,' says the sergeant, eyeing them through the scope of his sniper rifle.

An Afghan soldier nearby says, matter-of-factly in accented English, 'Just shoot them,' and begins to raise his M16 rifle.

'Hold on, not yet, mate,' says the sergeant calmly, gently pushing the man's rifle muzzle down. Another Australian hefts his rifle with a 40-millimetre grenade-launcher fitted beneath the barrel, loads it with a red smoke grenade, then fires it with the distinctive *bloop* sound of the weapon. The round lands near the men opposite us and they scatter as the red smoke swirls upwards. It's a warning, and they get it.

The atmospherics continue to deteriorate as we patrol onwards towards our target village. Men can occasionally be seen flitting between trees on both sides of us. More red smoke grenades arc outwards to warn them off. Pete says, 'Stay close, boss.' If the shooting starts, he'll try to get between me and the incoming bullets, or just jump on top of me. Pete is a big boy; the idea of him dropping on top of me is unappealing, even if we're getting shot at. Off to my right I can see the other half of our patrol, which includes Don Spinks. He gives me a quick thumbs up.

There is a pause while a shepherd comes down the track, oblivious to the building tension. Someone steps forward to speak to him. Behind the shepherd, more movement can be seen. Two men run out to the dirt track we are following, about 200 metres ahead.

A moment later the air is split by a massive detonation. It is an IED. The two men were trying to arm a pre-positioned explosive device, probably attaching wires connecting it to a trigger, when it exploded. Chunks of earth and bits of the two insurgents are thrown skywards and land on the path and surrounding area. I drop into a small hollow in front of me, where Pete joins me a second later, weapon raised, ready. A couple of

bullets snap through the tree canopy. I can hear shouting from the trees beyond the dust cloud marking the point of the explosion.

The shepherd, who has picked himself up, wide-eyed and jabbering excitedly, tells one of the Afghan soldiers that there are many men ahead, waiting for us. It's an ambush. The corporal in charge of our patrol decides that continuing towards the village is going to get someone killed. New orders are quickly passed along the line and we head off at an angle, away from the river and the village, heading back towards Patrol Base Musazai. There'll be another day and a better setting to have this fight. A few more bullets follow us, parting shots in the literal sense. The radio operator answers a squawk from his equipment, then turns to me with a grin. 'Hey, sir, the boss back at Musazai wants to know if you're still in one piece!'

'Tell him that both me and his career are still intact,' I reply. Behind us, the locals are picking up the pieces of the two dead men. That evening, just before sunset, we watch their funeral through a telescope. It's a big turnout.

That night we sleep on a low hill close to Patrol Base Musazai. Soldiers sitting in a Bushmaster vehicle are on watch. It's not the ideal place to spend the night. There is no encompassing protective barrier or barbed wire, and plenty of ways insurgents could approach undetected. I make sure my rifle is close beside me when I slide into my sleeping bag.

Not long afterwards I am woken by one of the soldiers on sentry duty. 'Sir, there are some bad guys sneaking around in the low ground on the west side of the patrol base. The boss wants us to put up a few flares, so they can try to spot them. Do you want to fire the illumination mission?' he asks. After a brief internal debate—it's warm in my bag and bloody cold outside—I get up. I pull on my boots and drag my body armour on over my T-shirt.

The moon is full and bright, casting shadows in the gullies and folds, providing plenty of cover. I join the two men preparing the illumination

rounds for the 84-millimetre Carl Gustav medium support weapon. It is a heavy metal tube that can fire high-explosive rounds or a flare attached to a parachute. The noise and pressure of the discharge is brutal, and heavy-duty earmuffs are essential. I search around in the dark, looking for some hearing protection. ‘Where are the ear defenders, boys?’ I ask.

‘Sorry, boss, some fucker nicked ’em,’ is the response.

‘Great,’ I say, rummaging in my pockets for the puny foam earplugs I had used on the helicopter ride, jamming them in my ears.

The radio crackles with fire orders and the direction they want us to shoot. I lift the Carl Gustav onto my shoulder, bracing my legs to resist the recoil. With a clunk, one of the soldiers slams a round into the chamber from the rear. I elevate the weapon, trying to estimate the range to the area to be illuminated. The men beside me press their hands over their ears as I shout, ‘Firing now!’ The hilltop is lit by the huge yellow fireball that leaps from the rear of the tube, accompanied by an almighty bang. A few seconds later the illumination round bursts in the night sky and a brilliant flare drifts slowly earthwards under a small parachute.

My ears are ringing like a fire station alarm. The radio squawks, ‘Slightly further west!’ as another round is slotted into the tube. I make the adjustment and fire again. Bang! More flames lick the ground behind me, throwing up rocks and dirt. At the moment of firing, a military photographer who is travelling with me, Sergeant Neil Ruskin, snaps the shutter on his camera. Another man-made star lights the valley below.

There is no firing from the patrol base below. ‘They’ve either gone to ground or disappeared,’ the radio eventually announces. ‘Stand down.’

Much later, I will discover two things about this night. One is that Neil Ruskin managed to precisely capture the moment I fired, his photograph showing the incandescent cloud of gas blasting rearwards, the projectile flashing forwards past an Australian flag flying from a pole jammed in the

ground—a great image, one I'll treasure. The second is that the pressure and noise of the two shots from the Carl Gustav destroyed 30 per cent of the hearing in my right ear, where the weapon had sat on my shoulder, and induced permanent ringing. I wonder how I manage to injure myself so regularly. Some people shouldn't be allowed out without proper supervision.

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As Christmas rolls around, Don Spinks and I are on the road again, trying to visit as many of the troops as possible, especially those in Afghanistan. Every command post, dining area, briefing room and grubby dugout is bright with decorations sent from Australia. I chuckle at seeing one soldier heading outside the wire with reindeer antlers on his helmet. On Christmas Day I am in Tarin Kot, scooting from one gathering to the next, offering season's greetings, making short speeches, eating exotic treats, joining in games of cricket, turning sausages on barbecues, pinning on medals, accepting small gifts and trying to show the troops how much I appreciate the sacrifices they are making, especially today. Pete follows me around, slipping me painkillers from time to time, or grabbing my elbow when my dodgy ankle crumples under me. By the end of the day I'm exhausted, but satisfied.

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Late on the afternoon of 11 January 2011, I stand on the soil of Afghanistan one last time. I have completed a hectic schedule of meetings and farewells in Kabul and Kandahar, saying goodbye to friends and senior commanders and introducing my successor, Major General Angus Campbell. We have spent a very full day here at Tarin Kot, which, fittingly, will be my last port

of call in the country. We wait at the end of the airfield while final checks are made to the C-130 Hercules that will ferry us to the UAE.

I wander over to a roughly made shelter where a couple of Afghan army soldiers sit, smoking and trying to catch a few rays of sun as the temperature starts to drop. '*Salaam*,' I say, and they respond noncommittally. I try a few words in English, but they shake their heads and one waves a hand near his ear to show they don't understand. It's a shame.

I look at them both. They are young, thinly whiskered, and hunched in camouflaged winter coats that seem too large for them. Their weapons, second-hand M16s, are a bit dusty but they look serviceable. One has his green beret pushed to the back of his head, while the other is hatless, but they both wear good boots, which wasn't always the case when I first encountered Afghan National Army troops a year ago. These are the men, along with others like them, who will help decide the fate of this grand venture. I'd like to say something meaningful to them, tell them I'm leaving but wish them well in their struggle, but there is no interpreter here.

In the end I just smile and shake both their hands, offering the only words of Dari I know. '*Tashakor*—thank you,' and '*Khuda Hafez*—goodbye.' They thank me in return, looking slightly puzzled. I walk to the rear ramp of the Hercules, which is now ready. Neil Ruskin snaps my picture. I look down at the brown dirt of Afghanistan for the last time and step aboard.

Two days later, on 13 January 2011, I hand command over to Angus Campbell. We sign the status of command document, shake hands and I'm out of a job. Joint Task Force 633 is in a very safe pair of hands.

I am ready to leave. The year has taken its toll, mentally and physically. The challenges have been great, the rewards greater, the sadness profound. I have commanded men and women from all three services in a complex and dangerous campaign in alien lands and unforgiving seas. I have never had

such an all-consuming and fulfilling appointment. I believe I have done some good, in a worthwhile cause. I have been privileged to share laughter, danger, discomfort, elation and tears with thousands of Australians who represent the best of our nation.

The next day, I fly home.

AUSTRALIA, 2011–12

32

EXIT WOUNDS

It is early February 2011. I am home again, back in Australia. I have returned from war for the last time.

Jane and I are packing for a holiday when she finds me in the garage loading the car. ‘Darling, another soldier has been killed,’ she says taking my hand. Corporal Richard Atkinson, a combat engineer, has been struck by an IED. He died in the Tangi Valley, the same blighted area where Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney was killed. I had met this young soldier and the news hits me like a blow. That night, for the first time since coming home, I struggle through nightmares.

Jane and I spend our holiday at the beach, just as we did when I returned from Iraq five years ago. We even go to the same place, Noosa in south Queensland. The weather is warm, the surf is reasonable. It is wonderful to spend hour after hour with Jane. We stand with small waves lapping our ankles, smelling the salty breeze. Dark thoughts coil in my mind, but below the surface. I try to forget the dreadful tally during my leadership in Afghanistan—ten dead, more than sixty wounded.

Then, on 9 February, I see a news report that yet another Australian engineer has been shot dead. He is Sapper Jamie Larcombe. An Afghan interpreter died with him. I can’t stop thinking about their families. A figure appears on the TV—23, the number of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan up to this point. The words ‘what a waste’ keep forming in my head.

This holiday is a break after Afghanistan, but also a time to think of my future. I am one of a few who could be promoted to become the Chief of the Army, a three-star general. The Minister for Defence is supposed to announce the names of the new defence chiefs sometime in April, around Anzac Day. Apparently, I'm in with a chance. The alternative is to leave the army. This is my fifth year in the rank of major general, and if I am not selected for the top job, I must make way for new blood. It's a philosophy of renewal that I support. I don't have a say in either outcome. As the days of our seaside holiday drift by, I try not to dwell on the past or the future.

But with my leave coming to an end, I still feel tired and my sleep is erratic. The recent combat deaths are rekindling the sadness of last year. I'm not ready to return to work. And, after commanding in a combat zone, the prospect of a temporary desk job in Canberra, while I wait for a decision, fills me with dismay. I have plenty of unused leave and contact the Chief of the Army to ask for more time off. Like me, he is also waiting on a decision about his future. He suggests that the minister will take a while to make up his mind. My leave is extended by three months.

With a long break ahead I should be relaxed, but I feel untethered and lack direction. I can't seem to fix on anything that seems worth doing. It is all so unimportant. I try to take an interest in current events, sport and television programs, but I can't escape a feeling of pointlessness. Everyday life seems frivolous. My mind keeps darting back to Afghanistan. I picture heavily burdened men walking carefully down a dirt footpath or wading through an icy aqueduct or climbing aboard a helicopter for another high-risk night mission. These things seem real, substantial. The confected nonsense of television reality shows and political posturing in Canberra seem utterly without meaning.

I contact some of the soldiers who were wounded. Many of them are still struggling with their injuries, still facing more surgery and months or

years of rehabilitation. I am humbled by their grit and determination. I had promised myself that when I returned I would try to visit the families of all those who were killed in 2010. But I can't muster the courage: I know that I will break down in front of them, and what would be the good of that? I badly want to see them, to offer my personal regrets, but I need to be stronger. This realisation that I cannot do what I feel is my duty makes me feel pathetic. What have I lost compared to them?

I experience a feeling of severance, that I am no longer responsible for all those men and women I have constantly worried about, fought to protect and felt so deeply accountable for. I realise I can't do anything more to help them—a situation that feels like a betrayal. I am redundant, without purpose.

Released from responsibility, it is as though a dam in my mind has cracked, flooding me with despair. The barriers I built and shored up over the years, especially over the past twelve months, start to shift and buckle, releasing a pent-up misery. The emotional descent is rapid, and within weeks of our holiday I am utterly bereft.

The sadness and regret that I had pushed deep down inside resurface, amplified. Memories flood my mind: cold bodies in a morgue, limbs and torsos violated by bullets or explosives or a shattered helicopter; the pain and uncertainty of the wounded whose lives have been forever changed; the horror in the eyes of men who have picked up pieces of their mates. My nights are tormented by ghastly nightmares, punctuated by sudden shouts as I come awake, shaking and confused. The melancholy that has lurked in my heart now begins to tear at my sanity.

I try to fight it. Surely I can beat this by force of willpower. I deliver myself a stern lecture: Snap out of it! You're whole, unharmed, alive! What have you got to moan about? I force myself to think of the hurt being suffered, right now, by men who have survived awful wounds. I think of the

wives and partners making daily treks to hospitals, sitting in sterile rooms, listening to doctors' reports, supporting their damaged men. I force myself to think of the grieving families of the dead. Jane has endured a long separation and months of worry, and now here I am moping about like a sulking child. I am dismayed by my weakness and selfishness. You pathetic jerk! Get a grip of yourself!

Determined to be 'normal', I smile at small jokes or amusing stories, but it feels false, skin-deep. I try to take an interest in the lives of friends and family, to share in their achievements and concerns, but inside I'm a dark pool of sorrow. I feel constantly distracted, as though events around me are ethereal—the weight of memory and the millstone of guilt seem to be the only things of substance. I talk to Jane, my one true confidante, and she encourages me to stop being so hard on myself, to remember the happy moments, the enjoyment of being with servicemen and women, the pride in them I had spoken of so often. This sound advice bounces off me.

An undirected anger works within me. I am angry about the random violence that claims lives on the battlefield, that good men—men with families and wives and children and sweethearts and friends—have had been snuffed out. I burn with anger at the months and years of pain confronting the badly wounded. I resent the fact that they must now struggle to live without eyes or legs. I am angry with myself—I should have done more, thought of some new technique, insisted on some new strategy, to save them. But I didn't. I couldn't. I was powerless, a spectator in a deadly circus, cast in the role of official mourner and speechmaker.

The rawness of the new memories sharpens images from the past. The old familiar demons invade my sleep and sometimes my waking hours. I see the hand of a man buried alive in Iraq. The thump and buzz of incoming artillery fire again fill my ears. I am again seized by the terror of leading soldiers across a dark, empty desert. My fingers feel the weight of a man's

head and I smell the stench of burnt flesh. The dread of death, so close, so immediate, hollows my chest, as it did when I forced shaking legs to walk past half-hidden mines. I am transported back to a Baghdad suburb where a car bomb in a marketplace left a little girl's pink sandals floating in a pool of blood. I taste bile in my throat at the realisation that I have ordered men down a road that killed them. I feel like I'm losing it.

In the midst of this misery I am summoned to Canberra to see Lieutenant General Mark Evans. He wants me to debrief him and his senior staff on my observations and assessment of the Afghanistan campaign. It requires an effort of will to make the trip and present myself. I play the role of a calm, rational returned general, offering wise comments and penetrating insights to him and the other officers. I even make a few jokes. Inside, I'm churning.

Afterwards, General Evans, always a gentleman, walks with me to my vehicle. In the car park he asks me how I am, really. He has detected my unease. My instinct is to trot out another glib answer, to say that I'm fine. But I'm not fine and I'm tired of the facade. I take a deep breath and tell the truth. I say that I'm not well, and that I'm troubled by the losses of the previous year and older memories. I tell him I am having trouble sleeping, that I feel unhappy and guilty. He tells me, rightly, that war is always a source of sadness and loss, that lives spent on the battlefield are the brutal currency of combat.

I know this but my mind rejects his counsel. I ask him to speak to Angus Houston, the Chief of the Defence Force, and tell him about our conversation.

When I get back to Puckapunyal I know that I must do something, to seek help or go under in a wave of misery. I go to the base's medical centre and the office of a military psychologist. It is the start of an awful,

belittling, painful but necessary journey. I am now officially mentally unwell.

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The psychologist refers me to a general practitioner, one of the contracted professionals working on the base. Once again, I provide a brief summary of my experiences and current state of mind. He refers me to a psychiatrist at the Repatriation Hospital in Melbourne. On the appointed day, Jane drives me to the city, an hour away. All the way there I keep remembering the last time we did this, twenty years ago, and the humiliation I felt at being dismissed by a psychiatrist in a tweed jacket who thought I was merely ‘out of sorts’.

The psychiatrist this time is attentive, understanding and very familiar with the emotional trauma that can arise from military service—post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. He is an expert in the field and heads a department that treats many veterans, both serving and long retired. He spares me the task of repeating my story. Instead he is satisfied, at least for the time being, with a description of my symptoms: the nightmares and anxiety, the guilt and anger, the loss of interest in everyday events, and the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. I mention that I have previously been diagnosed with PTSD, but have only had irregular treatment over the years. I admit I have spent a great deal of time and energy burying my problems, while getting on with my career and my life.

At the end of my monologue he asks some questions and tells me he believes I am suffering acute PTSD and depression. He says medication will help and that he will arrange a program of meetings with a psychologist along with periodic sessions with himself. I walk out with a prescription for drugs to calm my anxiety and rebalance my moods and an appointment for

some counselling. I still feel wretched, but at least I'm doing something about it. As we leave, Jane squeezes my hand and says, 'We'll get through this, sweetheart.' I feel reassured that I'm not alone and that she believes I'll get better.

When Angus Houston calls in May 2011, I have already begun the course of medication. I have also made up my mind that I cannot continue to serve in the army. The prospect of being selected to be the Chief of the Army is an extraordinary one, especially for someone who started life in the army as a private. It would be a career-topping pinnacle. It is also impossible. The new chief of the Australian Defence Force and the chiefs of the three services, navy, army and air force, will take up their duties in July this year. Even if I were to be chosen, which I doubted, I would not be well enough to do the job. Leading the army for three years would demand unrelenting hard work, a clear head and no distractions. Our soldiers deserve nothing but the best leadership. In my present condition, I can't provide that.

The conversation with Angus Houston moves along easily, despite the gravity of the exchange. I've known and worked with him for many years and we have a very warm relationship—I have always felt I could say exactly what needs to be said. He was especially kind and concerned during some of the darkest days of my time as commander in the Middle East. I owe him a lot, including an honest assessment of my health. I tell him straight up that I'm not well and explain why. He already knows some of this. I also tell him I'm not fit to command, and that I should be considered unavailable for the army's top job.

In his quiet, unhurried way, Angus says, 'John, you will not be Chief of the Army.' It's a mercy: the game is over. Now I know where I stand. I expect that an old friend of mine, Major General David Morrison, will get the top job—he is clearly the best candidate. David is a fine leader and a

good man and it gives me great satisfaction that the army I love will be in such sure hands. With this behind me, my hope is I can get better.

I could not be more wrong.

Sorrow now takes centre stage in my mind. Irrational anger simmers, bursting out at the slightest provocation. I seethe at the indifference of most Australians to the efforts of our troops overseas. Anxiety stalks me. At shopping centres I feel threatened, surrounded by unseen dangers. I find myself moving towards the walls of crowded spaces to protect my back. I look for exits and places to take cover. The hyper-awareness that had me flinching at unexpected noises now becomes a disabling compulsion—I jump at any sudden noise. One day we are on a train to Melbourne and the conductor behind me calls out, 'Tickets, please!' I jerk in terror, throwing up my arms defensively and emitting a cry of fear. Several people laugh. To my total humiliation I start to weep.

A battle is being waged between my rational intellect and my damaged mind. When the guilt reduces me to tears, or when the anger blinds me to the hurtful things I say, or when I convulse in fear at the slamming of a door, the real me—the thinking person who has led soldiers in battle and managed the most complex problems—watches aghast at the blubbering, twitching, confused fool I have become. I'm a mess. And my darling Jane bears the brunt of my despair. I add shame to the list of emotions swirling in my mind. I've become a person I despise.

Compounding this is physical pain. The damaged vertebrae in my neck, the injury I sustained in a training accident on a tank back in 1982 and aggravated in Afghanistan, has deteriorated further. The pain is intense. It radiates through my chest and into my left arm, which throbs and aches so badly that at times I can't even take the edge off it with painkillers. A neurosurgeon tells me I must undergo surgery; it will be several months before this can occur.

The combination of pills for depression, anxiety and pain relief leaves me dull-witted. I find myself groping for the right word or mangling my speech when I have always prided myself on my vocabulary and speaking skills. I drop glasses and plates. I sleepwalk and wake, confused, in an odd part of the house. When I do sleep, it is a visit to Hell. The nightmares have become more horrid, more vivid and more frightening, and they come every night.

My sessions with a psychologist provide some relief—I learn a breathing technique that helps calm me—but little else changes.

Then one day I fall off a cliff; at least that's how it feels. I am in the office of my psychiatrist and Jane is with me. On the way in, she whispers, 'Be strong, darling.' At one point the psychiatrist asks, without emphasis but watching me closely, if I have had thoughts of suicide. I recoil at the words, but the idea of oblivion, of ending all this, seems like an escape. I stammer, then it comes out: 'Sometimes, I wish I was dead.' Then the tears come, from such a deep place that I can hardly breathe. The look on Jane's face pierces my heart.

The doctor is concerned. He quietly suggests a period in hospital for more focused treatment. He wants to change my medication and increase the dosage, and hospital is the best place to do this. He suggests a week, perhaps a little longer.

The next day I wave goodbye to Jane, who is in tears, through the wire-impregnated glass of a door in a psychiatric ward. I am locked in. When I find my way to my room, I sit and weep like a child. How did it come to this? What the hell am I doing here? Outside my window, just metres away, construction workers in hard-hats and fluorescent vests are building a new wing for the hospital. They drop bundles of steel pipes onto concrete flooring and hammer on metal beams. Each crash evokes a convulsion of

fear. I lie on my bed, waiting for the artillery shells, or the car bomb, or the IED. Restful it isn't.

In a corridor I meet a woman in her thirties in her pyjamas and dressing gown, her unwashed hair hanging in oily locks. 'Hello,' she says. 'You must be new. I've been in for a while; this is my third time here.' She pulls up the sleeve of her dressing gown and displays her forearm, which is crisscrossed with red welts and a few bandages. 'I cut myself,' she informs me, in a matter-of-fact voice. 'Why are you here?'

Over the days that follow, the change in my medication regime goes pretty well, although there is one bad day when the demons come crowding into my room with such ferocity that I press the button to summon the nurse, who finds me incoherent and sobbing—more pills are administered and I sleep for twelve hours. I spend most of my time alone, avoiding the other patients locked in the ward with me. My room has unusual fittings: the taps are simple buttons, the door handles are mere nubs, there are no towel racks, and the shower curtain rail is embedded in the ceiling—it's suicide proof. I feel totally out of place, but perhaps I'm kidding myself.

Late in my week-long imprisonment I have a cathartic session with a senior psychiatrist, a professor, and for the first time ever I tell my story in full. I describe every event that has shocked or revolted or terrified me, one after another. It's a long session, and by the end I am a mess. I feel like I've been bashed. But I also feel like I've crossed a bridge, or at least taken the first steps onto it.

That night I have only one nightmare instead of the usual series. The following day I dress in my street clothes and put my pyjamas away in my small suitcase. I want to feel normal. I ask if I can go for a walk outside. After some deliberation, I'm allowed to join a small supervised group of well-behaved patients on a short stroll around the block.

On the last day of my stay, I am allowed to walk alone, unsupervised. Outside it is cold but fine. I head for a cluster of shops a kilometre or so down the road, in search of real coffee. I am almost there when I see rubbish on the footpath ahead of me, the wind whipping at a black plastic garbage bag. My mind screams, *IED!* I freeze, then force myself to calm down. You're in Melbourne, it's just a bag of rubbish. Keep walking. I stare at the flapping black bag. Take a step, you idiot! I take a step, then another. I keep my eyes on the bag until I am several paces beyond it. My pulse only slows when I drop into a seat at a coffee shop.

EPILOGUE

It has been a year since my stay in the psychiatric ward. I have retired from the Australian Army after thirty-eight years of service. I was well managed through this process, but when the curtain came down it was unceremonious. I dropped my Defence mobile phone and identity card into a small cardboard box, a clerk said, ‘See ya,’ and that was that.

Jane and I vacated the last army married quarters we will ever occupy, moving to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland’s southeast. Our new home, the twenty-third house we have occupied during our life together, is set in a few acres with lovely gardens and a creek running through it: a quiet, restful sanctuary.

I finally had surgery to relieve the chronic pain in my neck and left arm. I was fortunate to have a fine surgeon, but my recovery was painful and took longer than expected. Now I have only a little residual pain and a metal plate in my neck as a souvenir.

I still suffer nightmares on most nights. At times I wake violently, thrashing about, fighting off ghosts. The pills help, although I still feel a bit groggy the next day.

I still can’t drive a car except for the shortest of trips into the little town near our house. I don’t trust myself. I can be fine, but then a car will come unexpectedly from a side street or veer in front of me and I suffer a convulsion of fear. The words ‘car bomb’ are on the edge of my mind. This happens when I’m a passenger too, but at least then Jane is in control. Bizarrely, I can ride a motorcycle without having these foolish panic attacks. I have no idea why.

Busy places are still difficult. I'm told it's because I feel I'm not in control of my surrounds. The noise is unsettling. The scream of a child will rasp my nerves like a rusty blade, while the crash of a shopping trolley causes me to spin, half-ducking in expectation of an attack. It's ridiculous, I know, but that's the way it is.

From time to time I become deeply anxious, but can't say why. Sometimes I have an overwhelming desire to get away from where I am or to avoid an upcoming activity. Travelling to one of the rare social events I can tolerate, I occasionally become so tense that Jane can sense it in the car. I have a feeling of dread, even though I know the gathering will be pleasant and undemanding. I force myself to go through with it.

I try hard not to dwell on the troubled past, but it invades my consciousness without prompting. At other times an insignificant reminder of a place or a person, or even a smell, will trigger a vivid memory. Sometimes, it's the other way around: I have memories so strong I can smell the places where the original incident occurred. I smell strong perfume and burnt flesh whenever my mind takes me back to the bombed wreckage of cars north of Kuwait City. Mental images of the bombed market square in Baghdad are accompanied by the smell of raw sewage and blood. When I recall bodies in a mortuary, I catch a whiff of antiseptic and bodily fluids.

My ability to concentrate has improved, although I sometimes forget simple things. Jane has to remind me to take my medication, even placing it in my hand. My sentences sometimes drift to a halt because I can't remember the word for something. At times I feel like a simpleton.

Sometimes I'm prone to overblown emotions and now cry easily. I have become a bit of a serial hugger; I hug my dad and my brothers and some of my male friends without the slightest hesitation, an activity I once reserved exclusively for women and girls. It feels good and right.

I regularly visit the clinical psychiatrist treating my PTSD, a pleasant woman with an encouraging manner. She's altered my medications, and my moods are generally more positive—mostly.

I have had numerous counselling sessions with a psychologist. One piece of advice was interesting, and perhaps helpful. He told me I was too quick to blame myself for the events that have caused me heartache and that I need to forgive myself for my perceived failures. When I first heard this, it sounded like one of those saccharine thoughts-of-the-day printed at the top of the pages of my diary. But I think I understand what he was on about.

The rational part of my mind is prepared to consider such a notion, but my emotional being is not. For most of my career I have been responsible for others, a duty of care I have taken to heart. It is almost impossible for me to deny the iron-clad accountability that I have lived by, and expected of others, for nearly forty years.

Something else the psychologist said, an extension of the idea of self-forgiveness, was that if I can't exonerate myself, then I should simply accept the loss and hurt and get over it. I was told that I can acknowledge that bad things have happened, that good men died or were terribly wounded, accept these unpleasant facts, then put the thought aside. In other words, I should grieve and move on.

I can't do that. Rationally, I know that my feelings of guilt and remorse do nothing to ease the suffering of mourning families or the pain and disability of the wounded. Emotionally, though, I feel compelled to bear part of their burden. I constantly wear a braided wristband, one I made in Afghanistan from parachute cord. It is fastened by a button; the small click it makes whenever I place my hand on a desk or tabletop prompts me to spare a thought for the men killed under my command. Some might think this maudlin; I think of it as paying respect. Perhaps one day I will be able

to act on the psychologist's advice, but I suspect it will be a very long time coming.

I am not completely impervious to good advice, however, nor am I determined to wallow in my condition. I am fortunate beyond words: I have found and kept the love of my life, Jane, and we have raised two boys into men we are proud of; I have had an extraordinary career, filled with excitement and change; I have seen the world and met countless amazing people; I have had the thrill of command and the satisfaction of success; I have been humbled and uplifted by guileless young warriors; I have been trusted and have trusted others with my life; I have walked with heroes, and count them as friends; I have had adventures you can't pay for and rewards you can't buy.

I would change only a few things, if I could. I wish that I had found the young man called Ra-eed, kidnapped from his place of work in Baghdad in 2006, and been able to return him to his father. I have often wondered: how did you die, Ra-eed? I wish I'd sent an IED clearance team to accompany the patrol that struck a roadside bomb in Iraq, killing three men and grievously wounding a fourth. I wish I'd been proven wrong about the need for a mortuary facility in the UAE.

I would not change my career, but I know it's come at a cost. I have been told I have good insight into my situation and I have made some self-assessments and decisions. To survive, I have to constantly remind myself of these things:

- I admit I have a problem, one brought on by repeated exposure to death and to life-threatening events. It has a name: post-traumatic stress disorder. I also suffer depression as a result of sadness and guilt.
- I know I let the damned demons take charge too often. I vow to do better.
- I will not allow myself to be diminished by the fact that I witnessed industrialised killing and horror and callous brutality and torture and

murder. I was doing my job, one my nation sent me to do.

- I assert that I am not abnormal, merely damaged. One day I might accept that I am wounded, but the memory of the physically ruined men I once commanded is too raw to allow that yet.
- I accept, after two decades of denial, that my reaction to the misery I have witnessed and the things I have done in the course of my duty is normal; totally, absolutely normal.
- I recognise that anyone who had seen what I have seen would probably have suffered the same debilitating effects. Maybe they would have come apart sooner. Who knows?
- What I do know is this: I have been a soldier; I have served my country; I am proud of what I have accomplished; I have endured hardship, trauma, pain and loss; I have done so voluntarily; I am not a victim, I am a survivor.
- I understand that I am on a long journey of recovery, but I know also that I will complete that journey, someday. I am determined to get better. I will beat this thing.

But having such insights and making such commitments are not enough. I am determined to help other men and women who, like me, have been emotionally wounded by their experiences. My working life has been spent surrounded by soldiers and, more lately, by sailors and airmen. Over the years I have spent many, many hours talking to them, an activity I found a pleasure as much as a duty. It is vital for commanders to be seen and heard, but just as important to listen. If they trust you, Diggers will tell you things you won't otherwise hear through the chain of command. Even when the issue is one that I'm aware of, it is very useful to get the soldier's opinion. They are almost always the ones who have to make someone else's bright idea work, or have figured out a better way to do things, or will be

putting their lives on the line to implement some new policy or piece of equipment.

Perhaps it is because I was once a private myself, but I have always found it easy to talk to Diggers. I think they sense I genuinely care about them and what they have to say. Some of my most profoundly enjoyable and informative moments over the years have been spent in quiet conversation sitting on a sandbagged wall, or at the railing of a ship or at the back of an aircraft hangar.

These intimate talks have taught me numerous things, among them the fact that many servicemen and women are troubled by their experiences in war zones or disaster-relief operations. Some will come out and say it outright, others hint at it, others strenuously avoid discussing it, but I have heard it clearly in their voices and seen it in their eyes. Thousands of the men and women we have sent off to war now carry mental scars as a result of the things they have seen or done. I know men in their forties, women in their thirties and young Diggers in their twenties who have been profoundly affected by their service and are suffering as a result.

I know that some have turned to the false solace of alcohol or drugs, or driven away loved ones, or drifted into aberrant behaviour or pervasive melancholy. Others have struggled on, sometimes without help, until they can no longer cope. I know of many strong and vibrant soldiers who have attempted suicide. In the US, 6,500 veteran suicides were recorded in 2011—the suicide rate is now *twenty-five times higher* than the fatality rate on the battlefield.

What few of them will acknowledge is that they might have PTSD. The warrior ethos that infuses men and women in the services, especially young men, creates instinctive barriers to admitting such weakness. And it is perceived as weakness—make no mistake—and weakness is despised. In an environment where physical and mental toughness are lauded as vital

prerequisites of success in training and combat, it is no wonder that servicemen and women downplay injuries, mask them with painkillers, carry on despite the pain and, especially in the case of mental health and emotional trauma, deny the problem even to themselves. The very idea of mental illness still evokes negative responses, especially among younger veterans. Over the last decade the Australian Defence Force has done a great deal to address mental health and promote greater awareness of the problem, but much of the target audience isn't listening or can't bring themselves to admit that the message is aimed at them.

My hope is that the story of my twenty-year struggle with PTSD may encourage other veterans to acknowledge their problems and seek help.

I know from first-hand experience that it is not something you can ignore or bury or shrug off in the hope it will go away. PTSD also affects the people around you: your family, loved ones and mates.

Not everyone who experiences the traumas of war will develop PTSD, but in some people, especially if the trauma is intense, the horror and fear can become imprinted in the memory. This is a natural process; it's okay not to feel okay. Being diagnosed as suffering PTSD is not a judgment; it is not a sign of weakness; nor is it something shameful. It is just another medical condition, a normal response to abnormal events. If you suffer from PTSD, you are not alone. There are people ready to help.

I believe that many cases of PTSD among our returning troops go undiagnosed. I worry that these emotional and spiritual wounds are deliberately hidden for fear of ridicule, or because of a 'warrior' self-image, or in order to fit in and continue to have a career. I made that mistake, and the wave of misery that eventually engulfed me carried me to the edge of oblivion. Belatedly, I recognised the depth of my own condition and sought help.

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As I write these words, the tally of dead and wounded Australians in Afghanistan stands at thirty-three killed in action and 230 wounded in action. Apart from two wounded sailors, this heavy burden has fallen on the army. The deaths resulted from explosions, rifle and machine-gun fire, rocket attack and helicopter crashes. The wounds inflicted included lost limbs, fractures, gunshot wounds, blindness, deafness, spinal damage, lacerations, penetrating fragments and traumatic brain injury. Many men suffered multiple wounds. There is a very good chance that the figures for Australian deaths and wounds in action will have increased by the time this book is published and read.

When I think of the ten men who were killed in Afghanistan while I was the commander there, and the sixty-four others who were wounded, I cannot avoid the question, 'Is it worth it?' I recall sitting in my office one day in 2010, soon after a repatriation ceremony for another dead Australian soldier. With me was one of the senior officers on my staff. We looked at each other and I said, 'You know what, mate? I'd never say this in front of the troops, but I'm starting to wonder if these deaths are worth it.'

My colleague replied, 'You're not the only one asking that question, boss.'

Some will argue that the men and women we send to war are all volunteers, who know the risks and take them willingly. Others will say that casualties are the unavoidable cost of doing business in a combat zone. There is an argument that says the lives of a few sometimes need to be expended for a greater good. Another line of reasoning takes the grand-strategic view of international affairs, putting the case that Australia—a relative minnow in terms of military might, albeit a well-trained and reasonably well-equipped minnow—has no choice but to maintain strong

bonds with a large and powerful friend, the United States. That friendship sometimes demands reciprocal payments, in the form of going to war and spending some lives. A cold, clear-eyed analysis of these claims tells me that they are all true, much as it pains me to admit it.

But these arguments only work at the intellectual level. They do not make sense at the human level, the level at which every life is precious, where each dead soldier is *someone* and not just a number. These men had parents, sisters, brothers, partners and children who loved them. They all had lived and had an expectation of more living to come. They all had dreams and hopes and potential.

These were the thoughts that ran through my head as I stood, time after time, in the morgue in the UAE. How could any of these lives be forfeited? What measure of success in the campaign to fight the Taliban and build Afghanistan's army could possibly warrant the grim procession of dead men that I supervised? I know, absolutely, that the men who died in Afghanistan were doing what they loved, with mates they respected, for a cause—rejecting extremism, denying terrorism, helping a needy people—which is honourable. I also know that advances have been made in training the Afghan National Army and improving security in Uruzgan province; some of the people of the province also have an improved quality of life. But will our efforts, no matter how impressive locally, significantly influence the myriad problems afflicting the government and people of Afghanistan? Ten years from now, will anyone in Afghanistan remember that Australians shed blood for them? For a man like me, a lifetime soldier inculcated with a sense of duty and service, these are difficult questions to confront.

In the prologue to this book, I wrote that such thoughts seemed disrespectful, even treasonous. But the fundamental question has continued

to gnaw at me: is what we have achieved in Afghanistan worth the lives lost and damaged?

Today, I know the answer—it's no. It's not worth it. I cannot justify any one of the Australian lives lost in Afghanistan. This assessment acknowledges but disdains the international power politics, security frameworks and national self-interest that got us into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is the judgment of my heart and soul. When I examine my conscience and weigh the value of individual lives, the conclusion I reach is inescapable. At the human level, no life—no father, brother, husband, partner or son—is worth what we have achieved in Afghanistan and hope to leave as our legacy. The unpitying mountains of Afghanistan have watched the dust of that harsh, beautiful country absorb too much blood already, for little profit.

Politicians and defence strategists might take a different view, and probably should—in the stone-hearted realm of global security affairs there is little room for emotion. But I held a less lofty portfolio. I was a commander with responsibilities for men and women I knew, spoke to, laughed with, encouraged to fight and wept for. I do not claim some sort of monopoly on conscience or accountability; there is more than enough sadness to go around. But I was entrusted with the lives of people who risked all to carry out their government's policies. When I sent ten dead soldiers home from Afghanistan, I failed that trust, and it broke my heart. The awful truth is this: the extraordinary men and women of the Australian Defence Force will always do what is demanded of them, and if that includes dying in Afghanistan, they'll do it—but the price they have paid for progress in that distant, alien land is far too high.

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I enter the sea cautiously. It is cold. The waves break around my legs and waist and throw an icy spray of water onto my stomach and chest. I gasp, then dive under the next wave. Surfacing, I take a breath and swim out beyond the breakers to smooth water. I keep swimming until I'm short of breath and then stop to tread water.

Looking back to the beach a couple of hundred metres away, I see Jane standing at the water's edge, watching me. I lift an arm and she waves in reply. I'd promised I wouldn't stay out here long. Around me the grey-green water is rising and falling gently as each low swell passes. I roll onto my back and float. Only my face and part of my chest are clear of the water. I can hear the sea: the gentle susurration of waves on the sand; the distant clicks I imagine as fish or dolphins; the quiet swish and sigh of the water around me. Above me are a few clouds in a milky blue sky. I close my eyes and listen again.

I reflect on the emotional journey I have been on over the past year, as well as the years of sadness and anxiety stretching back to that pre-dawn darkness in early 1991, when I was about to go to war for the first time. Briefly, disturbing images flash across my mind, from that war and my other deployments. I let them go. I have been trying to use a technique suggested to me by one of the shrinks: to experience such memories but not let them sink their barbs into me. Today it works. I find I can touch on painful memories without letting them trigger fear and guilt. Maybe this is progress.

I keep my eyes closed. A lazy swell comes through and I feel my body lift and fall.

What have I learnt from my experiences?

I've learnt that life is precious and fragile.

I've learnt that war is a lottery; that no-one, no matter how skilled or deserving of life, is ever safe from arbitrary death.

I’ve learnt that courage takes many forms: heroic charges into machine-gun fire; leading men down a track that might hide a device intended to kill; running to a wounded comrade, regardless of the risk; fighting to save the life of a dying man in the dirt, with nothing but your hands and few instruments; or heading out on patrol after patrol, day after day, for months on end, into a valley where you might be killed.

I’ve learnt that courage is not just physical: it can be volunteering to carry the coffin of a dead mate into the belly of an aeroplane; the enduring courage of the grieving; the daily bravery of family members who tend their wounded warriors; or the patient courage of loved ones waiting at home, dreading awful news.

I’ve learnt that most Australians have no idea how fortunate they are, or how well their armed forces represent them in the world.

I’ve learnt that the mind, like the human body, is a wonderful but vulnerable thing, and that its invisible wounds can be painful, lifelong and even fatal.

I’ve learnt there is a way back from the confusion, anger and distress of profound mental trauma and that the first step is to admit you are suffering —and that doing so is another form of courage.

I’ve also learnt that love can staunch such wounds and help them heal, and that I am very lucky to be so loved.

Another swell comes out of the Pacific and slides past me. Again, my body rises and falls. I can hear a gull crying above me, while the sea keeps whispering in my ears. I breathe deeply, relaxed and calm. For a few minutes at least, I have found some peace.

POSTSCRIPT

I have been to war three times: twice in Iraq and once in Afghanistan. As a result of that service I developed acute posttraumatic stress disorder—PTSD. This book tells the story of my experiences in those conflicts and the emotional wounds they caused. Writing this book changed my life. I have been told, many times, that it has also changed the lives of others who endure their own battles with emotional trauma.

The impact of *Exit Wounds* and the events that followed its publication have been extraordinary. In many ways, the process of writing this book and the journey on which it has taken me is a story in itself. It has been a deeply humbling and gratifying experience.

The book came about as a result of meeting journalist Greg Bearup in 2010. At the time I was the commander of all Australian forces in Afghanistan, with additional responsibility for personnel, warships and aircraft deployed across the wider Middle East. Greg was travelling with then Minister for Defence, Senator John Faulkner, and then Vice Chief of Defence, Lieutenant General David Hurley, on a visit to the troops.

Greg and I hit it off from the outset. I was then, and remain, of the view that the Australian defence organisation generally handles the media poorly, especially in relation to our combat deployments overseas. With this in mind I included Greg in the frank briefings I provided the Minister for Defence, with David Hurley's concurrence. We also spent hours sitting huddled together in the back of air-force transport aircraft travelling around the region, shouting over the roar of the engines, talking about war, leadership and the life of a soldier.

Greg contacted me again in early 2011, not long after I returned home at the end of my year-long stint as national commander in Afghanistan. By then I was bone tired and emotionally drained. It had been a tough six months since our last meeting. Ten Australian soldiers had been killed in the last half of 2010. Greg talked about the strong impressions his visit had made and suggested that we collaborate on a book, perhaps a biography.

I was wary. Who would want to hear my story? I told him I wasn't really interested in a conventional biography but that I had been thinking of writing about PTSD. I explained, in a few words, that I had been struggling for twenty years with PTSD arising from my combat experiences and that my wife Jane and I had managed my emotional wounds in secret. Greg, an experienced and awardwinning journalist with a nose for an interesting tale, immediately said, 'That's sounds like a story worth telling.' I told him I would think about it.

A few months later, when the symptoms of PTSD had effectively ended my army career and when the world seemed pretty black, I desperately cast about for a way to make something good out of a bad situation. I wanted to help other veterans avoid my mistakes when dealing with PTSD; namely, keeping it secret, avoiding the issue, and refusing to get help out of a misplaced fear of appearing to be a failure. A book seemed the best way of telling my story.

Jane and I talked through the daunting idea of telling the world about our battle with my PTSD. We had guarded our secret for so many years. What would my former colleagues think? Would I be ridiculed as a self-absorbed whiner? What if I opened my heart and no one cared? I wondered whether the thousands of men and women of the Australian Defence Force whom I'd had the privilege of commanding would think less of me for speaking out. The prospect of baring my soul to strangers scared me more than any of my combat service.

Nonetheless, I was determined to take advantage of my senior rank and reputation to shine some light on the shadowy realm of emotional trauma among veterans. I wanted to describe the complex, confusing and brutal nature of insurgent warfare that has characterised modern conflict. I felt driven to tell Australia what our nation demands of its armed forces, and the price our veterans pay. I suppose I wanted to continue caring for our servicemen and women, even though I could no longer be part of their ranks. I resolved to go ahead. I wrote to Greg telling him to make it happen.

The original concept was for Greg to conduct lengthy interviews with me then write the manuscript. After all, I was then still in the early stages of my journey back from a very dark place. I was still prone to bouts of anxiety, irrational fears, nightmares, anger, flashbacks and most of the other classic symptoms of PTSD.

Then, as I began to sift through the boxes of letters and memorabilia of my three wars, Greg called again. Our literary agent, Deb Callaghan, wanted a summary of the proposed book to show to potential publishers. She needed 2000 words, sooner rather than later. Greg suggested that I have a go at writing it. He would ‘fix’ the document before sending it off.

To my surprise I found writing the summary relatively easy. I knew what I wanted to say and how to say it. I started by describing the lowest point in my emotional journey. I began by writing: ‘July 2011. I am sitting in a small room in a special wing of a private hospital in Melbourne. It’s a psychiatric ward.’ I think both Greg and I were surprised at how well the summary read. Eventually, and with only a few amendments, that hurriedly prepared pitch to the publishing industry became the prologue of this book.

Writing that pitch affected the way the rest of the manuscript was produced. I told Greg I wanted to attempt the first few chapters. He was encouraging and supportive, although he later told me that my words had struck dread in his heart. Not unreasonably, he foresaw a nightmare task of

salvaging the tortured prose of an overconfident amateur. I began writing, tentatively at first, but with growing confidence. I completed the first few chapters and sent them to Greg for review, anxious for his reaction. His subsequent telephone call changed the whole premise of how this book would be produced. ‘Mate,’ said Greg, ‘this is *gold*. Keep writing.’

Instead of being a ghost writer, Greg thus became mentor, writing coach and expert editor. When I struggled with the emotional toll of painful memories, he was a friend and confidante. In the process, he taught me a great deal about writing. Greg drilled me to strive for short, powerful sentences. He encouraged me to pare back descriptive text, allowing the reader’s imagination to fill in the details. ‘Make the reader do some of the work,’ he told me. He helped me get to the point, compressing interesting but unnecessary paragraphs into text that was punchy and crisp. His editing of my early chapters was a master class in writing. It seems I was a good student. Eventually I was producing chapters that needed only mild polishing instead of major surgery. Greg helped me find my voice.

As I approached each new chapter, I reached back into my mind to relive events of the past. It was a painful process that forced me to confront long-hidden memories. I had mentally buried many of the incidents described in this story, in the foolish belief that if I refused to contemplate the events that saddened or sickened me, then those experiences wouldn’t hurt me. It was a false hope. Dark thoughts haunted me for two decades and eventually wore me down to the point of utter despair.

But now I was forced to confront those bitter memories. I willed myself to once again see and hear and smell dreadful experiences, letting the emotions they evoked break over me. Then, reluctantly, I would try to describe those events and my reactions. I would tap out a few sentences on my keyboard, then a few more. Often, the wilful resurrection of memories

that I had denied for so long triggered old nightmares and new waves of grief. There were many times I dreaded returning to my study to write.

Then something unexpected began to happen. As I struggled through each chapter and began to review my work, I found that the process of converting distressing memories to words on a page somehow took the edge off the events they described. Instead of being transfixed by haunting recollections of my experiences, I became immersed in the process of editing. Did that sentence work as I intended? Was it descriptive without being too wordy? Did the paragraph hang together properly? Did it lead logically to the next paragraph? Would my words transport the reader to the time and place I described? Would they walk with me down those dark emotional passageways?

It was as though I was taking control, at least to an extent, of my memories. Now they were merely words, text to be reviewed and improved. I could cut and paste, reorder and rewrite. I *owned* those words, and through them I owned the memories they induced. The process was uncomfortable, often distressing, sometimes heartbreaking, but it was one I controlled.

Throughout, I had two wonderful sources of encouragement and strength. Greg was endlessly generous in his praise of my efforts and adroit in helping me burnish the text. My wife Jane was the first to read and review each chapter, bringing to bear her deep understanding of the journey we had shared, as well as the wisdom of a life-long reader. Jane was also the one who helped me through the distress and sorrow the writing sometimes aroused. She even wrote two of the chapters herself, providing her unique perspective on the effects that terrible events can have on the mind of a loved one.

Almost immediately after *Exit Wounds* was published, I began to receive letters, emails and telephone calls from readers. I was overwhelmed by the generosity and praise of dozens, then hundreds of people who felt the

need to get in touch. Veterans in their scores wrote to thank me for giving voice to their own feelings. Wives, husbands, sons and daughters of those we have sent to war told me how they too have suffered. They wanted me to know how grateful they were that their loved one had been encouraged by my words to finally seek help.

When I delivered talks about my experiences and this book, people often wept as their own emotions welled up. On many occasions book-signing sessions became opportunities for people to tell me their own stories of emotional trauma, often accompanied by tears and embraces. The readers lining up to say a few words as I signed their copy of the book included not just veterans and their families, but other Australians who serve our community in ways that routinely expose them to trauma: police and ambulance officers, fire fighters, nurses and doctors, emergency response personnel, and ordinary Australians who have stepped up to help during bushfires and floods.

Some of the people I have met as a result of this book have become firm friends. I am honoured to include in this group many sailors, soldiers and air-force personnel who served under my command and who now are fighting a new battle with emotional wounds. On the days when my own demons return to taunt me, I draw enormous strength from the knowledge that I am not alone and that in some small way I have helped others in their journey of reconciliation and recovery.

I am also well satisfied with *Exit Wounds* as a piece of literature. It has sold well and instilled in me a desire to keep writing. It is a tribute to those who helped review and edit the manuscript that I felt no need to make corrections to the text for this new edition.

There is one area, though, that I was unable to fully describe at the time I crafted the original text. In chapter 30, set in the period when I was national commander of Australian forces in Afghanistan, I describe the

actions of Australian soldiers during a deadly engagement that became known as the Battle of Derapet. In that chapter, I recount the death of Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, the last of the ten soldiers killed in action in 2010. The account includes the names of several men who would later receive medals for their gallantry and leadership during the battle. But there was one name that I was unable to include in that list at the time of publication, that of Corporal Daniel Keighran. As the manuscript for *Exit Wounds* was being finalised another far more important process was also underway. Daniel Keighran was being considered for Australia's highest award for valour, the Victoria Cross. That ultimate award is not bestowed lightly. Consideration takes time and approval is far from certain. Although I had a role in recommending the award, I was unable to openly write about Corporal Keighran's remarkable deeds while the procedure was still underway.

Since then, Dan has received the award he so richly deserved and his selfless valour has become public knowledge. The events of that day, 24 August 2010, are now part of Australian military history and Corporal Daniel Keighran VC takes his place as one of our nation's true heroes. Fittingly, this second edition of *Exit Wounds* includes a new appendix titled 'Beyond the Call', which I wrote soon after Corporal Keighran received his Victoria Cross. It provides a full account of the Battle of Derapet and Dan Keighran's extraordinary actions. If you want to know what genuine heroism looks like, read that appendix.

I hope you find this new edition of *Exit Wounds* thought provoking and rewarding. For my part, the process of writing this book and the many, many talks I have given since its publication have helped me accept the psychological wounds of my service as a soldier. I am still on a journey of recovery. In all probability it is a journey I will never complete, but I am

now stronger and more able to make that trek, thanks to this book and the ceaseless support of my wife Jane and many others.

I am proud to have served my country as soldier, I accept the price I have paid for that service, and hope by speaking out about the emotional damage I have suffered that I might help others find a way to confront their own demons.

John Cantwell AO DSC
Major General (Retired)
July 2013

BEYOND THE CALL

The following article by John Cantwell was first published in The Australian *on 8 December 2012. It is reprinted here with permission.*

THE sun has set behind the mountains of Uruzgan province, Afghanistan. The punishing heat is fading, but in the still-warm air the sweat dries slowly on the faces of the Australian soldiers gathered in a small patrol base called Anar Juy. They are preparing to mourn a mate killed in battle earlier that day.

The patrol base in which they stand is a rough rectangle of earth-filled steel mesh cages, with a dozen layers of sandbags on top to provide further protection from incoming bullets and rockets. Two flat-roofed observation towers rise above the walls. Perched on a dusty knoll, this is home for a group of around twenty Afghan soldiers and roughly the same number of Australians who are their trainers and mentors. When the base was first built, one of the Diggers looked up at its towers, radio masts and Afghan national flag and said it looked like a buccaneer sailing ship. The name stuck; for the men who live here between patrols into the deadly Tangi Valley below, patrol base Anar Juy is known as the Pirate Ship.

In the twilight gloom the Australians begin their act of remembrance. One of the soldiers hefts an 84mm Carl Gustav, a weapon similar to a bazooka, onto his right shoulder. He hears and feels the clunk as his mate shoves an illumination round—a flare—into the rear of the weapon. He raises the muzzle to a 45-degree angle and braces his legs against the

coming recoil. The watching soldiers press their hands over their ears as he says, ‘Firing now,’ then squeezes the trigger.

The flare is for Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, killed by an insurgent’s bullet in an intense three-hour battle near the village of Derapet. ‘Crash’ MacKinney was well liked, a veteran of East Timor and Iraq, a skilled marksman, greatly respected by his fellow soldiers. His death has hit the Australian soldiers hard. His wife, Beckie, is only weeks away from giving birth to their son, a brother for three-year-old Annabell. Just four days earlier, two more Australian soldiers had died: Privates Grant Kirby and Tom Dale. The toll is growing. A few of the weary soldiers shed a tear while others place an arm across a mate’s shoulder. Every man has proven himself today. Some have displayed extraordinary courage. Two men, Sergeant Sean Lanigan and Private Paul Langer, will later receive the Medal for Gallantry; their patrol commander, Lieutenant James Fanning, will be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal; a fourth man, Private Shaun Parker, will receive a Commendation for Gallantry.

But among the soldiers gazing sorrowfully at the hissing flare is one whose deeds have eclipsed even these courageous actions. He is Corporal Daniel Keighran, 27, an infantry corporal on his second tour of Afghanistan, having previously served as an armoured vehicle driver supporting Australian special forces in 2007. His extraordinary feats during the Battle of Derapet on that day, 24 August 2010, will be recognised with the award of Australia’s highest military honour for valour in the face of the enemy, the Victoria Cross.

THE BATTLE HAD ITS GENESIS IN THE EXPANSION of the area of Afghanistan covered by the Australians following the departure of Dutch and French troops in mid-2010. The main Australian force comprises about 700 soldiers drawn from the Brisbane-based 6th Battalion, Royal Australian

Regiment. Most of them are infantry soldiers, supported by combat engineers, armoured-vehicle crews, artillery fire controllers and other specialists. They have been in Afghanistan since mid-February 2010 and have been tested in scores of encounters with the enemy. Their morale is high. They have been tempered by battle.

In July they take over the role of mentoring the Afghan army unit based in the Deh Rawod area of western Uruzgan province, in addition to their existing responsibilities in central and northern Uruzgan. East of Deh Rawod is the Tangi Valley bandit country. The road running through it towards Tarin Kot is completely off limits to Coalition road traffic, which is forced to divert far to the south. The commander of the local Afghan army unit wants to expand his area of control into the Tangi Valley. The idea makes sense tactically and the Australians support it. In August 2010, joint Afghan and Australian patrols begin pushing into the valley, encountering enemy who engage them with rifle fire, but the skirmishes are inconclusive. One patrol almost reaches a village called Derapet, where a small group of Taliban fighters fire rifle bursts before fading away. That small cluster of mud-walled buildings will soon become symbolic of Australian courage.

The officer commanding the mentoring team is Major Chris Wallace, a respected and experienced officer. In consultation with the Afghan commander he orders the soldiers at patrol base Anar Juy to discuss security with the headman and village elders in Derapet. This type of activity is one of the basic tools in the counterinsurgency campaign. It allows the Australians to explain their objectives to respected figures, hear their concerns and build trust. But because of the lawless nature of the Tangi Valley, it is necessary to mount a ‘fighting’ patrol—a patrol that expects to get into a firefight—to reach the village, conduct the meeting then return to base. The operation will be launched on Tuesday, 24 August.

As the commander of Australian forces in Afghanistan at the time, I will monitor the situation from the command post at Tarin Kot. The operation is well planned and well supported. Before first light, ASLAV armoured vehicles, with their 25mm cannons, machine-guns and high-definition optical systems, occupy high ground overlooking the Derapet area, ready to observe and shoot. The spot occupied by the ASLAVs has been searched by combat engineers. It is a wise precaution: this is the same hill where a few months earlier Dutch and French troops were killed by an improvised explosive device (IED). The man in command of the engineers who conduct the search is Corporal Joel Toms. He will play another key role in the coming battle.

Also on the high ground are men with Carl Gustav weapons, armed today with high-explosive warheads. Two pairs of snipers are also in the field. Artillery, mortars, Apache attack helicopters and close-support jet aircraft are on call if required. An Australian surveillance drone is readied to provide aerial observation of the battlefield.

At patrol base Anar Juy, the dawn of 24 August finds Corporal Dan Keighran and the other men assigned to the patrol checking their weapons, rifle magazines, belts of machine-gun ammunition, grenades, navigation devices and first-aid kits. A radio check is made; the patrol has been assigned the callsign Papa Four Two. The infantry officer leading the fighting patrol, comprising both Australian and Afghan soldiers, is 27-year-old Lieutenant James Fanning. He has issued orders for the patrol the evening before; there is nothing more to be said. The first rays of sunlight creep down the sides of the bare mountains as the patrol files through a gap in the wall of the Pirate Ship and heads east.

A little while later the patrol pauses in a thick corn crop to wait for others to join them. Joel Toms and the other combat engineers arrive, having cleared the hill for the ASLAV crews. Before leaving the hill, Toms

had spotted an armed insurgent crossing the river below and fired several rounds at him: the first shots of the coming battle. A section of about a dozen Australian soldiers from another patrol base a few kilometres further west also appears. Their job is to provide security for the lead elements of the fighting patrol and to reinforce them if needed. Among them is Jared ‘Crash’ MacKinney.

The two groups of Australians haven’t seen each for some time and when they meet they exchange handshakes and whispered greetings. The men all know MacKinney’s wife is expecting their baby soon and Dan Keighran is among those from Anar Juy who ask, ‘Hey Crash, how’s your missus, mate?’ ‘Fine,’ MacKinney replies with a smile. ‘Not long now.’ The patrol reforms and continues east, with MacKinney’s section—callsign Four Three Charlie—some distance to the rear. The combined force heading towards Derapet is now more than forty strong, and comprises 31 Australians and 12 Afghan soldiers.

Up on the high ground overlooking the valley, the ASLAV crewmen spot signs of growing danger. Their commander, Lieutenant Tim Hurley, radios that he can see groups of Afghan women and children streaming out of Derapet, heading east. Soon afterwards, Hurley sends another radio report: men of fighting age are moving into the area on foot and motorcycles, taking up positions in the crops and among the mud-walled buildings to the east and north. The men in the advancing foot patrol acknowledge the report. Their focus sharpens.

Forty minutes later, callsign Papa Four Two is moving around the south side of the village. They intend to swing left, towards the green strip of trees and crops along the river, before veering back into the village for the meeting with the elders. There is no one in sight. The men spread out, advancing cautiously. Two Afghan soldiers are in front, followed closely by

Sergeant Sean Lanigan and Private Paul Langer. The only sound is the crunch of the men's boots on the stones. It is 9.10 am.

The silence is shattered by a crashing volley of Taliban fire. The lead troops are caught in low ground, pinned down by fire from multiple directions. The Australian and Afghan soldiers return fire at dozens of insurgents hidden in the thick vegetation, less than 60 metres away. Bullets whiz past or thud into the ground, audible even above the din of rifle and machine-gun fire and the bangs of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) fired by the Afghan soldiers. 'We did what infantry soldiers do in a fight,' Lanigan would later say. 'We fought to regain the initiative from the enemy.' At one point Lanigan looks to his right to see Dan Keighran and three other men sprinting up a bare rocky ridge, into a storm of rifle and machine-gun fire. Other Australians fighting their way forward also see them go. The observers all think the same thing: surely they'll be killed.

WHEN THE HAIL OF BULLETS FIRST BREAKS OVER THE PATROL, Keighran instantly realises the bare ridge rising to the right is a vital location. In an infantry firefight it is standard procedure to get a machine gun to the best position—usually any piece of high ground to support the rest of the force. Keighran knows this. He also knows that the position will be open to enemy fire, and that the insurgents will almost certainly realise the Australians will try to use the ridge line. He goes anyway. Within seconds of Keighran starting up the slope, leading two Afghan soldiers and Private Shaun Parker, who carries a MAG58 machine gun, bullets slash across the ridge, kicking up dust all around them. Keighran will later recall how that 45-metre dash seemed a very long way. 'I thought I was done for,' he says. 'Just as I hit the crest, two machine-gun bursts landed all around me. I could see rounds hitting the dirt right in front of my feet.'

Miraculously unharmed, they reach the ridgeline and throw themselves onto their bellies. Bullets are tearing up the ground and Keighran realises their dash has carried them too far: they are fully exposed to the incoming fire. ‘Back! Back!’ he yells above the noise, and the four of them begin wriggling backwards. Dirt and rock fragments from ricochets are thrown into Keighran’s face. He stops several times to return fire, shooting towards the muzzle flashes and smoke in the greenery below. Eventually they reach a position where they are partly shielded from the incoming rounds and Keighran tells Parker to bring the machine gun into action. Patrol leader Lieutenant James Fanning would later describe the sound of the machine gun as ‘music to the ears’ at a time when all hell was breaking loose around him and his team.

‘You’d be hard pressed to find a better soldier than Shaun Parker,’ Keighran will later say. Parker is also physically tough: despite being only average height and build, he has run up that ridge carrying a MAG58 weighing 11 kilos and close to a thousand rounds of ammunition totalling a further 25 kilos, in addition to at least 20 kilos of body armour and other gear. Gasping for breath after the mad run up the ridgeline, Parker starts firing bursts, directed by Keighran. The two Afghan soldiers also return fire under his guidance.

In the ambush area below, Sergeant Sean Lanigan is firing round after round from his rifle while shouting orders to the Afghans and Australians with him, pinned down in the shallow ruts and hollows in the ground where they’d flung themselves when the firing started. He orders one of the Australians to fire 40mm grenades from the launcher slung under the barrel of his rifle; the flat crump of exploding grenades adds to the racket. The Afghan soldiers just ahead of Lanigan are firing RPGs, the back-blast of each one smashing back over him and the others. Finally, he throws a red smoke grenade to mark their forward line so that the ASLAV armoured

vehicles can start shooting. Their fire strikes ground just ahead of the pinned-down patrol: the accurate and deadly fire of the ASLAVs saves lives many times that day.

Lanigan, a man of few words, is someone you'd want with you in a fight. He is also a wonderful mentor and guide for the Afghan soldiers, whom he likes and respects. Realising the insurgents are occupying one of the close-by aqueducts—the dug-out irrigation channels running between fields—even in this extreme situation he tries to coach the Afghans to assault the aqueduct. Eventually, though, he turns to Lieutenant Fanning, who is sharing the dubious shelter of a tree trunk with him, and calmly says, 'I'm pushing forward,' before shouting to Private Paul Langer: 'On me! Let's go!'

Langer doesn't hesitate. Together, they run forward into the waterlogged aqueduct. They work as a pair, firing past each other, dashing forward, clearing Taliban insurgents who fight back hard, not just from within the aqueduct but from many other directions. Others soldiers follow them. When their assault is complete, Lanigan and Langer have secured a vital area of the battlefield, from which much of the later fighting is conducted. Their actions will be recognised by the Medal for Gallantry.

In the thick of the battle the patrol commander, Lieutenant Fanning, tells Corporal Lukas Woolley to get more firepower up onto the ridge to support Dan Keighran. Woolley is an energetic man who needs no encouragement. He rounds up several Afghan soldiers carrying RPG launchers and machine guns and shepherds them to the ridgeline, where Keighran takes charge, placing them in the best fire positions. In doing so Keighran exposes himself to more incoming fire, a pattern that will be repeated again and again over the coming hours.

For the first 30 or 40 minutes of the battle, most of the enemy fire comes from the area close to the Australians fighting in the low ground near

the village. Now the battle area begins to expand, as more and more Taliban arrive. The insurgents in the battle area are also moving around, exploiting their knowledge of the ground, showing surprising tactical skill.

Additional enemy machine guns are also brought into action from further up the valley. More and more fire is being directed at the patrol and the ridgeline occupied by Dan Keighran and the others. In his words, ‘Every insurgent in the valley who owned a PKM [machine gun] had dug it out of wherever it was hidden and was getting into the fight.’ He is busy on the two radios he carries, talking to his boss, Fanning, and the other troops down below to coordinate the supporting machine-gun and RPG fire from his team on the ridge.

At one point Keighran realises he needs to push over the ridgeline to get a better look at the enemy firing from the low ground, so he can direct the ASLAV fire. He dashes forward as bullets cut across the hillside. The ASLAV crews respond to his directions and start slamming cannon rounds into enemy positions right in front of the main group below. The boom of high-explosive airburst rounds, fired from Carl Gustavs on the same ridge as the ASLAVs, also echoes around the hills.

Keighran is constantly on the move as he adjusts the fire of the men with him. He shouts to Shaun Parker that he’s going to draw enemy fire so Parker and the others can spot the Taliban firing positions among the corn and marijuana crops. In amazement, Parker watches him go, running along the bullet-riven ridgeline, then he starts firing his MAG58 machine gun in bursts at the enemy’s muzzle-flashes below. Keighran sprints to a new position further up the ridgeline before being driven to take cover again by the weight of incoming bullets, from where he returns fire from his own assault rifle. Several times he rears up again to expose himself fully to the enemy below, and is rewarded with yet more bullets, revealing the locations

of yet more Taliban gunmen. Shaun Parker's MAG58 is hammering back at them.

Keighran realises that his new position would be a good location for the artillery officer accompanying the patrol—a joint fires observer (JFO) trained to coordinate all forms of ground fire, artillery, attack helicopters and combat aircraft. Keighran spots Captain Brendan Perkins about 100 metres back down the ridge. Rising to a half-crouch, he races down the bare ridgeline, again chased by bullets. At times he is forced back onto his belly, crawling forward as rounds snap past, before again rising to make another dash. He slides to a halt beside Captain Perkins and, dispensing with the courtesy of ranks, shouts, 'Mate, we need you up on this ridge! Follow me!' The pair retrace his dangerous journey, working their way back up the hill through a welter of fire.

To help Perkins in his role as JFO, Keighran then repeats his earlier trick: he deliberately stands up and makes a dash to draw enemy fire, so others can spot the shooters. This is no rush of blood to the head. It is a deliberate act of selflessness. Enemy bullets are already flailing the ridgeline before he rises; the torrent of fire builds in intensity and focuses on him the moment he stands up. Then, incredibly, he does it again. And again, each time attracting even heavier fire. It works: three more enemy firing positions are spotted and engaged.

With the volume of enemy fire mounting, patrol commander Fanning sends an urgent call over the radio to the section held in reserve: 'Four Three Charlie! Get up here!' Jared 'Crash' MacKinney and his section mates start running towards the clamour of the firing. After struggling over rough ground in searing heat for more than half a kilometre, the soldier carrying the section's MAG58 machine gun starts to flag under the crushing load of the gun, ammo, body armour and other equipment. MacKinney grabs the MAG58 from him and hands over his own weapon. They continue

up onto the lower part of Keighran’s ridge, which is still being raked by heavy fire.

The pair drop onto their bellies in a position to provide supporting fire, with MacKinney deciding to retain the machine gun. As he is about to shoot, a bullet strikes him in the left shoulder and enters his chest, doing terrible damage. He collapses face down behind the MAG58 and lies still. The soldier beside him immediately renders assistance. Another soldier leaves cover, running across to help. With bullets slashing past, the men drag MacKinney into some meagre protection, little more than a small hollow. Other soldiers see that the vital MAG58 is unmanned; it is snatched up and brought back into action.

Keighran stands up and runs, once again. Taliban machinegunners see him and swing their weapons onto him. Bullets tear the air around him and smash into the dirt near his feet. While he is drawing the bulk of their fire, soldiers trained in advanced first aid work on the unresponsive MacKinney. They keep it up, under fire, while a helicopter is summoned. Still ducking bullets, the men begin to carry him to an area close to Derapet village for evacuation.

Corporal Lukas Woolley seems to be everywhere. He has dashed forward through heavy fire to pass out ammunition. He has made the radio call reporting the casualty. Now he makes a headlong run over several hundred metres to mark the landing zone for the evacuation helicopter. On the way he collects a couple of combat engineers including Corporal Joel Toms; they begin checking the landing area for IEDs, probing for buried explosives and triggering devices, racing against the clock as the helicopter approaches.

The courageous American helicopter crew make two attempts to land through enemy fire but are beaten back. Finally, Lieutenant Fanning orders ‘Rapid fire!’ from every man on the battlefield and the ASLAVs up on the

supporting position. Under this covering fire, the helicopter gets in on the third try. MacKinney is loaded on and the chopper lifts off for the Tarin Kot hospital, only minutes away by air. Despite everything, he is dead when the helicopter lands. A few minutes later, from the command post within the Tarin Kot base, where I stand monitoring the battle with the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Jennings, I telephone my boss back in Australia to tell him the bad news. Soon, a pregnant Beckie MacKinney will hear she has lost her husband. The faces around me in the command post are grim.

Back at Derapet, the fighting rages for a further two hours. The MAG58 machine guns consume hundreds of rounds, while magazine after magazine is clipped onto rifles with sizzling barrels and rapidly emptied in the desperate battle. Apache attack helicopters make repeated runs with their deadly cannons, while the 25mm fire of the ASLAV armoured vehicles provides vital close support. Throughout, Dan Keighran remains up on the ridge, constantly moving, dodging bullets, directing the supporting fire.

Finally, the sheer intensity of the battle begins to wear on both sides. The enemy, a disciplined force of up to a hundred fighters, has suffered heavy losses—at least thirty, perhaps as many as fifty, have been killed or wounded—but there are no further Australian or Afghan army casualties, a testament to their skill and luck. Lieutenant James Fanning weighs the situation and wisely decides to extract his exhausted troops and head back to Anar Juy.

The Australians start to peel away, the men taking turns to pull back and provide covering fire. They are followed by several groups of insurgents. The Diggers mount a series of blocking actions, hitting the pursuing Taliban, inflicting more casualties. Dan Keighran, Shaun Parker and the others come down off the ridge; it’s the first time in more than three hours that they have been out of the line of fire. A single precision guided

artillery shell drops from the sky and slams into one of the mud-walled buildings occupied by insurgents. It's like a full-stop on the battle. Finally, the Australian–Afghan patrol is in the clear.

The patrol shakes out into tactical formation and begins the trek back towards the Pirate Ship. They carry MacKinney's body armour, helmet and other equipment, a burden of sorrow. Keighran takes his turn carrying the gear, but now he is running on sheer willpower as exhaustion and thirst hit him and the other men. By the time they reach Anar Juy, several have vomited from extreme fatigue, Keighran among them. The heat, the stress and the constant exertion of the day have stretched them to their limits. Keighran will later say that he had never been so physically shattered in ten years of hard military training and operational service.

Finally entering the gap in the wall of the Pirate Ship, the men say little to each other. They have survived an intense period of combat, a fight that will be dubbed the Battle of Derapet, but lost a good mate. There is no backslapping or exultation, just relief—and sadness. But the men immediately reload their magazines, clean their weapons and make ready to go again if needed. There is no rest until everyone is fully ready. They receive warning of a possible patrol the next day.

A FEW HOURS LATER, SOON AFTER DUSK, THE MEN GATHER to mark Jared 'Crash' MacKinney's passing. The bang of the illumination round being fired into the sky is replaced by silence, apart from the hissing of the burning flare. With the others, Dan Keighran lifts his face to the light and thinks of Crash. When the flare finally sputters and dies, he turns towards the accommodation shelter, tired beyond words. In his sparse bunk space, musty with the smell of dirt and sweaty combat gear, he thinks of his wife Kathryn for a few moments before sleep overcomes him.

He has said nothing of his own actions that day, but the other Australians at patrol base Anar Juy know that they have witnessed hair-raising courage. They know Dan Keighran changed the tide of the battle, and saved lives. He repeatedly, deliberately and knowingly exposed himself to enemy fire to relieve the pressure on the rest of the patrol and to enable others to spot the Taliban gunners. He placed his own life in danger, repeatedly, for the sake of others. He willingly stood in the face of withering fire to distract the enemy while his mates worked to save a fallen comrade. He directed supporting fire vital to the outcome of the battle, one that has inflicted a major blow to the Taliban and that would later be seen as the start of the process of securing the Tangi Valley. He was an inspiration to those with him in the fight.

On 24 August 2010, Dan Keighran marked himself as a hero, although he would never be comfortable with that label. His mates knew it from the opening minutes of the Battle of Derapet. Now, with the award of the Victoria Cross, the rest of Australia knows it, too.

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